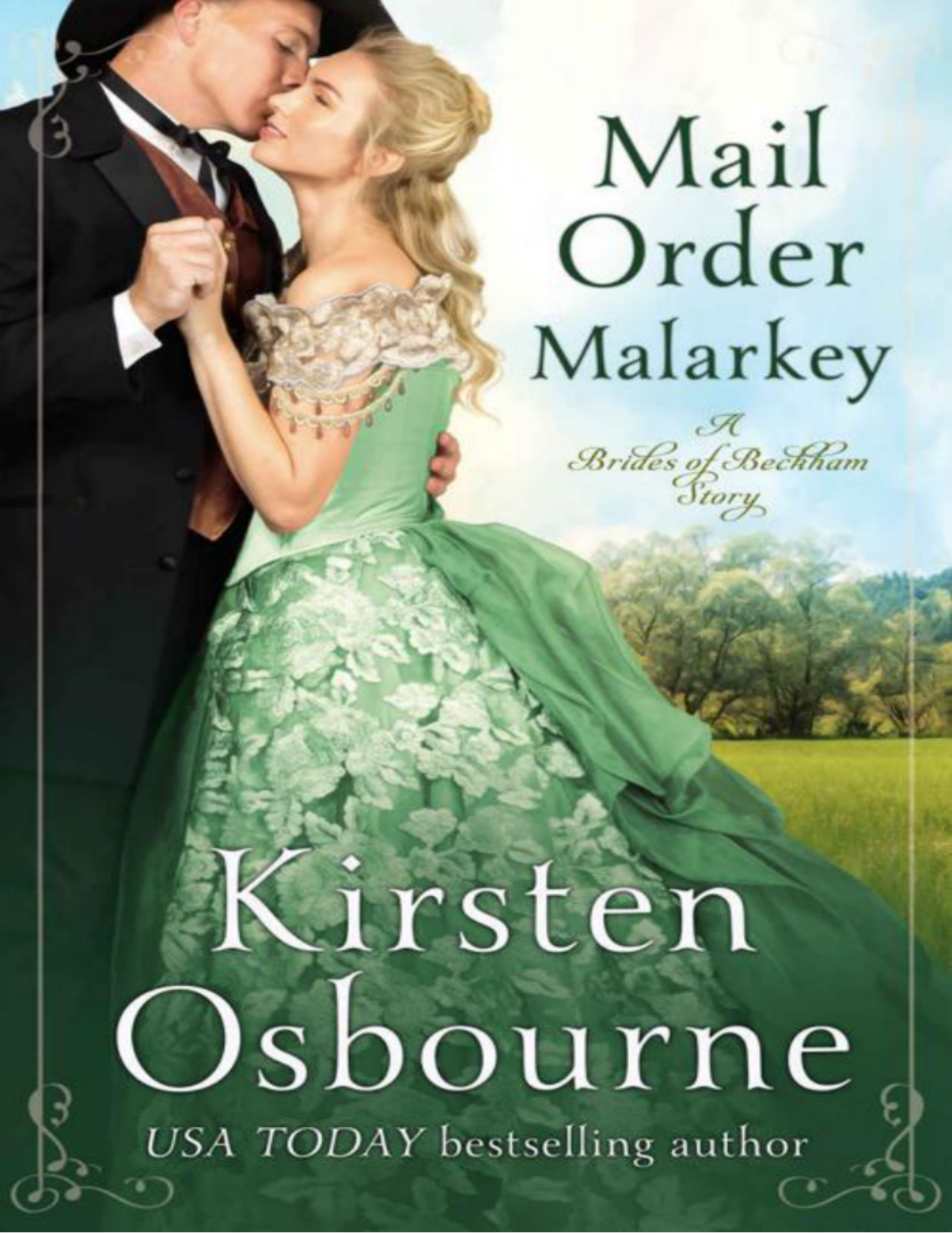

Mail Order Malarkey
A Brides of Beckham Story
Kirsten Osbourne
USA TODAY bestselling author

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Chapter One

Miriam Royal came in from her garden, waving a hand in front of her face, trying to cool off. She was getting too old to spend so much time outside in the summers. Her change of life was upon her, and she wasn't getting any younger. It didn't help that her time outside was spent gardening, which wasn't easy work to start with.

Of course, now she had to cook supper during the hottest hours of the day. If only there was a way to keep the air in the house at an even sixty-eight degrees, she would be the happiest woman alive, but everyone knew that wasn't happening.

Walking to the ice chest in the corner of the kitchen, she stuck her head right inside, praying it would cool her off at least a little before she turned and started the stew her son had requested for supper. He loved her beef stew, and they'd just butchered a steer a few days before, so it was a good time to make it.

Quickly cutting the meat into pieces, she put them in the bottom of her Dutch oven to brown while she peeled the potatoes and the carrots. She hated peeling and growing. She truly wasn't a fan of living in the country if the truth were told, but it made her son so happy to live there. He'd grown up in the city, and she felt she owed it to him to allow him to live where he was happier now.

Cameron came in just as she was taking the biscuits out of the oven. He hated when there were no biscuits to go with her stew. "That smells delicious," he said, walking straight to the basin and washing his hands. He knew his mother would thrash him if he didn't, and she

didn't seem to care that he was in his thirties.

"You need to find a bride," his mother said without preamble. "I can't do everything I could when I was a young wife. It's time you brought one in, and even if she can't cook, I'll train her to be the best wife a man could ask for."

Cameron sighed dramatically. "You know I don't have time to court a woman. Someone has to keep this ranch going, and that someone is me." Cameron had twenty men who worked for him, but he was still in charge, and his finger was in every single piece of the pie that was the Royal River Ranch.

"So, if I find you a bride you don't have to court, then you'll marry her?" she asked.

Cameron shrugged. He knew very well that women were in short supply in Montana. "Sure, Ma. Whatever you say."

Miriam narrowed her eyes at her son. Obviously, he wasn't agreeing with her, but he had acquiesced and that was good enough for her. She'd contact the mail order bride agency that had sent out one of the young ladies she'd met when she'd visited the church in Cauldron Valley. She'd gotten the address and name of the owner from Bridget, and she was going to write her a letter. She needed the help, and this was the easiest way to find it.

And Cameron had agreed, though she was certain he hadn't meant to. The man barely listened to her. It seemed to be the way of men to never listen to anything their womenfolk had to say. It didn't matter to Miriam though. She now had permission to find herself some help and Cameron would have a bride—and that meant

grandbabies!

When Cassandra Arnold stepped out of the home where she worked as a nursemaid for the two sons of the wealthiest couple in town, she raised her face to the sky to drink in the sunlight. The Randalls didn't like their children to be out of doors, and quite frankly, Cassandra didn't feel alive unless she was outside.

When she'd been a girl, living outside of Beckham, Massachusetts, and going to a country school, she spent most of her time outside, playing in the snow or in the summers, growing her own kitchen garden. Her mother wasn't fond of digging in the dirt, so Cassandra had done it for her, and it had been the best time of her life.

Having to stay inside all day to take care of the Randall children felt like it was more than just work—it was a punishment, and one that tortured her as well as just making her uncomfortable.

Thankfully, she had Sunday afternoons off after going to church services with the family, and she was going to make the most of it. Perhaps she'd walk out to see her family, but that didn't appeal as much as it should have. What she really wanted to do was remove her socks and shoes and stand in the dirt. Anything less than that and she wouldn't feel ready to work again.

As she walked along Rock Creek Road where the Randalls lived, she passed a woman who had been several grades ahead of her in the country school she'd attended out for a walk with her husband and baby. "Hello, Elizabeth!" she said with a smile. She'd always liked

Elizabeth, even though her younger siblings had been hellions and had earned themselves the nickname “demon horde.”

Elizabeth Tandy grinned at her. “Cassandra. It feels like it’s been forever since I’ve seen you. Aren’t you caring for the Randall children? I would expect to see you outside more!”

Cassandra sighed. “Yes, I am, but they don’t like the children to spend time outside. They think their time should be spent in more studious pursuits. Thankfully, I have the afternoon off, though all I really want to do is take off my socks and shoes and stand in the dirt.” It wasn’t something Cassandra would admit to a lot of people, but she knew Elizabeth would understand.

“I remember you were always getting in trouble at recess because you wouldn’t keep your feet dressed,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “We’re just about home. Come and stand barefoot in our back garden for a bit.”

“Back garden? Are there flowers?”

“Yes, there are flowers, and even a small vegetable garden.”

“I would love that. May I weed them for you? Or plant something new? I’m itching to just play in the dirt!”

Elizabeth laughed. “I’m sure there’s something to do out there.” She led the way into the house and to the parlor where she took the baby out of his pram. “I’ll show you the garden after I get my little one down for a nap.”

“I’ll wait here, if you don’t mind,” Cassandra said.

“That would be good. Give me a minute.” Elizabeth disappeared from the room, and Cassandra looked out the window at the back

garden which awaited her. She truly couldn't wait to dig her hands into the dirt.

When Elizabeth came back, she offered, "Would you like some lemonade? Or some cookies? I'm sure we have some in the kitchen."

Cassandra shook her head. "No, I just want to dig."

Elizabeth smiled. "Why aren't you a western wife? You could dig in the dirt every day and cook with what you grow!"

"I would love that, but how on earth am I supposed to find a western man to marry in Massachusetts."

"You know what I do for a living, don't you?" Elizabeth asked.

"No. I truly don't get out much. I only have one afternoon a week off, and I guard it."

"I am a matchmaker. I get letters from men—and sometimes women—seeking a life partner. I have a letter from a man I believe would be perfect for you, if you'd like to read it before you dig in the dirt for a while."

Cassandra bit her lip. It sounded like the opportunity she needed to change her life, but what was the catch? There had to be something bad that would come out of it. "Am I obligated to marry if I read the letter?" she finally asked.

"Of course not." Elizabeth led her to the room across the hall, where a desk was against one wall, and a sofa was perpendicular. "Sit down while I find the letter."

Cassandra nodded, sitting on the sofa, waiting patiently for Elizabeth to find the letter. She'd had a hard time sitting still her entire life, preferring to move around and do things to sitting quietly.

When Elizabeth finally handed her the letter, Cassandra glanced down. The man had beautiful penmanship if nothing else.

June 2nd, 1895

Dear Potential Wife:

My name is Cameron Royal, and I live in Mountain Home, Montana. My mother and I live here together on a ranch on the Royal River. We have everything we need, including twenty men who help me work with the cattle.

The only thing we don't have is a wife for me, and a mother for my future children. My mother is itching to bounce her grandchild on her knee, and she is getting to an age where she needs help with the gardening and other chores around the house. She is a lovely person and would appreciate the company of another woman on a regular basis. She's even said she's willing to teach you to cook and clean if you do not know how to do those things.

I'm a decent looking man, but there are just not enough women to choose from here in Montana. There are usually five or six men for every woman, and no one needs that sort of competition when looking for a wife.

I hope you will consider my offer. My only real needs in a wife are that she is able to work, and she is young enough to bear children. If you meet both of those qualifications, and you would like to marry me, I would love to have you. Send me a response via telegraph so that I will be available to fetch you from the train station upon your arrival.

I've included money for train fare and for spending money along the way. I do hope you'll agree to be my wife.

Sincerely,

Cameron Royal

The more she read, the more excited Cassandra became. She liked the idea of marrying a man who would let her play in the dirt, and it sounded like that was one of the main things he needed a wife for.

"I want to do it," she said after a minute. "I want to marry Cameron Royal." She liked the way his name felt on her lips as she said it. "How soon can I leave?"

Elizabeth laughed. "As soon as the Randalls have someone to take your place, I suppose."

"I'll talk to them as soon as I finish digging in your dirt."

"As soon as you have a date when you can leave, I'll get the train fare taken care of and you will be on your way to being Mrs. Royal."

Cassandra got to her feet and clapped her hands. "Is it all right if I take my shoes and socks off in here so I don't get mud on my shoes? The Randalls are very particular about whether or not I have mud on my shoes."

"That's fine." Elizabeth looked amused.

In moments, Cassandra's feet were as bare as the day she was born, and she walked to the back door. "I'll be back."

She went to the vegetable garden first. She enjoyed flowers, but they weren't as necessary as the vegetables were. As the daughter of a

farmer, she knew how important fruits and vegetables were to people.

She carefully weeded between the rows of potatoes, carrots, and cucumbers. Oh, this garden was wonderful, so full of foods that made her happy.

Hours later, she did her best to brush the dirt off her dress, and her knees. She was covered in it, as she'd expected to be. Thankfully, when she went back into the house, Elizabeth called for a maid to bring her a basin of warm water.

"You really did make a mess," Elizabeth said with a laugh.

Cassandra grinned. "It was *glorious*. I pulled so many weeds, and I dug my toes into the dirt. It was exactly what I needed to make my afternoon off perfect."

"I'm happy to offer my garden any time you need to work in one."

"Thank you," Cassandra said. "Hopefully, the Randalls won't mind if I leave soon, and then I won't be forced to bother you again."

"You're not bothering me! Usually, Bernard does the gardening here because he finds it relaxing, but often, he's just too busy. So having someone willing to do it is a real blessing."

After washing up, Cassandra headed back to the house where she worked and lived, wishing there wasn't so much dirt still on the skirt of her dress. She'd tried to wash it off, but short of a scrub board, she was going to look a mess.

Tiptoeing up the back stairs, hoping not to be seen and heard until she could change, she was just about to enter her room when Mrs. Randall walked to her with a disapproving look on her face.

“Where have you been, Miss Arnold? You are filthy!”

“I went to visit a friend, and I helped her with her garden,” Cassandra said. Normally she would have immediately apologized and not met Mrs. Randall’s eyes, but this time, she had somewhere to go—somewhere she’d *rather* be. If the woman thought she needed to be fired, she could just do it.

Mrs. Randall’s eyes narrowed. “Did you not think of the mess you were tracking into my home?”

“I brushed it off the best I could, and I gave my feet and legs a thorough washing.”

Mrs. Randall looked as if she was offended. “You are not fit to care for my children, if you don’t know to clean yourself before tracking dirt into your employer’s home.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I was going to give my notice today anyway. Would you like me to leave immediately or train someone to take my place?” Not that there would be real training to do. The children were forced to spend all their time inside the house playing quiet games or reading. Cassandra didn’t know how the beautiful little boys hadn’t lost their minds already.

“Are you saying you no longer wish to be employed here?” Mrs. Randall looked shocked.

“I am. I’m going out west to marry a rancher who needs a wife. He needs me to dig in his dirt.”

“Well, I never!”

Cassandra didn’t say another word, instead waiting for Mrs. Randall to say whatever she was going to say. She knew the woman

was rash in her decisions, and she expected to be let go.

“You will pack your things and leave my house immediately. I will not be insulted by a servant in my own home.”

Cassandra nodded. “I understand. I would like to be paid my wages for the week before I leave.”

Mrs. Randall turned away, and Cassandra heard her mumble something that sounded like “ungrateful wretch.”

Hurrying into her room, she packed her things, and Mr. Randall stopped at her open door. “Mrs. Randall has said you’re leaving. I’m not sure what we’ll do without you.”

She smiled. “I’m sure everything will be just fine.” Mr. Randall had always been a great deal kinder than his wife. He seemed to know she was difficult to deal with.

He handed her the week’s pay and she left, going straight to Elizabeth’s home. There was no doubt in her mind her friend would put her up for a night or two as she got ready to leave on her great adventure.

Chapter Two

When Miriam got word that a young lady by the name of Cassandra Arnold was going to be there the third of July, she didn't bother to tell Cameron. No, she could sense that it would be better for everyone if she introduced him when the lady in question arrived.

Miriam was excited to not only have someone to help in the garden and around the house, but to have a daughter-in-law, who would someday be the mother of her grandchildren. She could already picture herself in her favorite rocking chair with the baby on her lap. Life would be glorious if she didn't have to work in the garden and she could rock grandbabies. So glorious!

On the morning of the third, she asked Cameron to hitch the team up for her. "What do you plan to do?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm going to Cauldron Valley for a few hours. I need to go to the mercantile, and their selection is better than the one in Mountain Home, and I want to call on a friend or two." She would do those things, so she wasn't lying, but truthfully, she was there to pick up her new daughter.

Cameron nodded. The request wasn't unusual, as she went into Cauldron Valley a couple times every summer. She had always preferred the shopping there to the shopping in Mountain Home. "I'll see to it," he said, eating the last of his breakfast, and pushing the plate away. "I'll go do it now. I need to get to work."

Miriam smiled, happy he wouldn't be taking the day off work to drive her. He'd done that a few times when he'd needed to get

something in town as well. “What do you want for supper tonight?” she asked. “I’ll pick up what we need while I’m there.”

He thought for a moment. “Nothing in particular, but I’d sure love some cinnamon rolls for breakfast.”

She wasn’t surprised. Cinnamon rolls had always been one of his favorite things. “I’ll make it happen. Let the men know.” When she made the cinnamon rolls, she always made enough for his men as well. It was a rare treat, and they all looked forward to it.

“I will.” He got to his feet and grabbed his hat. “Wagon will be ready before you finish the breakfast dishes,” he told her, going outside. “Will you be home to cook the noon meal?”

Miriam shook her head. “No, I made a few sandwiches and put them in the ice box.”

“Thanks, Ma.” And the door closed behind him.

Miriam was glad he was already gone because she was having a hard time keeping her face straight. She was so happy that Cassandra would be there that evening, she was ready to dance a jig. But if she started dancing, Cameron would know that something was happening that he didn’t know about. No, it was easier to wait and introduce him to his bride, rather than trying to convince him it was a good thing she’d sent for the young lady.

She did the dishes, and then went upstairs to the guest bedroom to make sure it was ready for her new daughter. The bed hadn’t ever been made up, but now it held a nice new quilt and pillows she’d gotten from plucking the feathers off of some of her pullets. The previous day she’d put a vase with a single red rose in it. To her, it

was perfect, and she was certain her new daughter would be pleased.

Since there was room—and a chaperone—she had readied the spare room. There was no need for them to marry the day sweet Cassandra arrived when they could wait for a few days and have a real wedding.

Miriam headed down the stairs and outside to the wagon. Why, she was more excited to meet Cassandra than Cameron was! If he knew she existed, he might be a little more excited, but Miriam knew with everything inside her that it was best that he not know what was happening in advance.

When she reached town, she was thirty minutes early for the train, so she headed to the parsonage to visit with Mrs. Cauldron. She enjoyed spending time with the other woman, and she had told Cameron she would go visiting.

When Mrs. Cauldron came to the door, she threw it wide, smiling. “My daughter-in-law is here with two of my grandsons. You must join us!”

“I’d love to. I only have a few minutes to visit, but I’d love to see the boys.” Miriam stepped into the house and followed Mrs. Cauldron into the parlor, where her daughter-in-law was trying to convince her sons not to try to climb the curtains.

“You know we can’t visit Grandma if you keep breaking her things.”

Mrs. Cauldron laughed softly. “Nonsense. Grandma raised two boys just like them. Of course they’re breaking things. It’s a Cauldron boy’s way.”

Miriam thought for a moment about how her husband would have reacted to Cameron misbehaving the way the twins were, and she knew it was a good thing he hadn't been anything like these boys.

After a nice visit, cut short by the need to go and fetch Cassandra, Miriam said goodbye to her friend and to the younger Mrs. Cauldron, whom Miriam didn't envy one bit. It was hard enough to be a young mother, but to be a young mother of twin boys who were the worst hellions around? The poor girl.

She drove the wagon to the train station, and sat watching until the train pulled into the tiny station. Cauldron Valley was just a whistle stop, and the train wouldn't be there for long.

When two passengers got off the train, she immediately knew it was the first person she was looking for, as the second person was a man, who looked to be hoping for ranch work.

She got down from the wagon and walked over to the young lady who seemed to be looking around her nervously. "Cassandra Arnold?"

The woman smiled, holding out her hand. "Yes! Are you Mrs. Royal?"

"I am. It's so good to meet you." Miriam ignored the hand and pulled the girl in for a hearty embrace. "If you're going to be my daughter, you'll call me Ma, like Cameron does, or Miriam. We're not standing on formality." She hated to be called Mrs. Royal because the name was…well, it wasn't her married name.

"Didn't Cameron come?" Cassandra asked, looking around once more.

“No, he had to work today, so I offered to come and fetch you,” Miriam fibbed. She’d have to tell both of them the truth within a few short hours, but it was better if she waited until she was home.

“I see.” Cassandra wasn’t bothered. She understood needing to work very well. “Well, thank you for coming to fetch me. I’ve been sitting for so long, I was starting to think I was becoming part of that train.” She’d gotten up to move at every stop along the way, but it wasn’t the same as being allowed to roam.

“I can certainly understand that! I felt the same when we came west ten years ago.”

“Are we going straight to the ranch?” Cassandra asked. She couldn’t wait to get there and be able to spend time outdoors. She hoped the garden was in a terrible state, simply so she could spend the time weeding it and maybe even planting a few more things.

“I need to stop at the mercantile first, if that’s all right. I’m almost out of flour and brown sugar, and Cameron would like cinnamon rolls for him and his men tomorrow. I think it will be a great way to start the Fourth of July, don’t you?”

“I do! Is there a fireworks display close?” Cassandra had always loved watching the fireworks.

“There is one in Mountain Home, which is the town closest to us. We always go. Independence Day is really special here,” Miriam said. “Do you have a trunk? Or just your bags?”

“Just the two bags. I was a nursemaid back home, and I didn’t have a lot of possessions. I hope it won’t make you think less of me.”

“Oh, not at all. I don’t care what you used to do. I care about

who you are now. And soon, you'll be a Royal." Miriam led Cassandra to her wagon, and climbed up to pick up the leads. When Cassandra had stowed her bags and gotten in beside her, Miriam said, "The mercantile is just a short way, but we won't want to have to carry that flour to the wagon."

"I agree. Usually, it would be no problem for me, but after so long on the train, I feel weak. I hate feeling weak."

"I felt the same way after our trip out here."

"Did you and your husband come out along with Cameron?" Cassandra asked, feeling like she was almost begging for some history of the family.

Miriam shook her head. "My husband died back in New York City, where Cameron was born and raised."

When Miriam didn't offer more information, Cassandra let the subject drop. "I was raised on a farm outside of Beckham, Massachusetts, and I spent every minute I could working on my mother's kitchen garden. I loved every second of the work, and I have missed it terribly. The family I worked for wouldn't allow me to take the children outside, so I could only spend time outdoors on Sunday afternoons. I was so excited to learn that you needed help in your garden. Cameron told me in the letter he sent."

"That's nice, dear." Miriam stopped the wagon and climbed down. It wasn't as easy getting in and out of the conveyance now that she was getting older.

The two women went into the mercantile, and they chose what they needed. The merchant's son carried their purchases to the wagon.

“You didn’t need to purchase fabric for me to have a new dress. I brought a Sunday dress and two day dresses.” Cassandra had never had three dresses until the past year. She was proud that she had so many.

“Oh, you’ll need more than that,” Miriam said, smiling. “Especially if you plan to dig in the dirt.”

“Just as often as possible.” Cassandra said with a smile. “I find it a little difficult to breathe here.”

“I did upon my arrival as well. The feeling will be gone within a week or two. The doctor I consulted said it was the altitude that was making me feel poorly.”

“Well, then I won’t bother to consult one. I’ll know it will go away soon.” Cassandra watched the scenery as they drove to the east. At least she thought it was to the east. It was a little hard to be certain.

“We’ll measure you for your new dress today, and then you can turn one of your older day dresses into a gardening dress. It’ll be nice to have one you don’t mind getting dirty.”

Cassandra laughed. “I don’t mind much if I get anything dirty.” She shrugged. “I love being outside too much to care.”

Miriam smiled. “Well, that pleases me because gardening is my most dreaded task. I do as much as I need to do to look like I’m working.”

“You won’t have to worry about that anymore. I don’t know how to can vegetables, unfortunately, so if you can teach me that, I can take care of the garden and even the canning.”

“I don’t mind canning, but I will teach you how. A good frontierswoman needs to know how to can.”

“Yes, she does,” Cassandra said. “I’m excited to learn to be a good frontierswoman. Can you teach me to shoot?” She loved the idea of knowing how to shoot.

“I don’t shoot, but I believe Cameron would be happy to teach you.” The faraway look in Miriam’s eyes when she said that told Cassandra there was more to the story. She hoped her future husband was more open about things than his mother was.

When they reached the ranch, Cassandra took her bags from the wagon to carry inside. “I’ll come back for the supplies,” she told Miriam. “I don’t mind carrying them in.”

“What a good daughter you’ll be!” Miriam said as she opened the front door.

Inside the house, Cassandra saw a man standing. “You must be Cameron. I’m happy to meet you. I’m Cassandra.” When the man just looked at her blankly. “The bride you sent for? Are you not Cameron?”

“Aye, I’m Cameron, but I have no idea who you are.” He stared at her like she’d lost her mind.

Miriam smiled. “Remember when you told me to find you a wife?” she asked. “Well, here she is!”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed, and it was obvious to Cassandra he was angry. “That’s a bunch of malarkey, Mother! You know I wasn’t telling you to send for a bride!”

Without another word, he strode from the house, and left

Cassandra staring after him, wondering what she'd done wrong. If he didn't want to marry her, then she would need to find someone else or go back to Beckham, and she was determined not to go home. No, she was in Montana to stay. It was too beautiful for her to even consider leaving.

When Miriam turned to her, she could see sadness in the older woman's eyes. "He'll come around," she promised.

Cassandra sighed. "You sent the letter?"

"Yes. And I received the telegram as well. He needs a wife, and he agrees he needs a wife, but he told me that none of the women in Montana he'd tried to court were acceptable. So I sent for you."

"What should we do now?"

Miriam smiled. "We measure you for the dress and we fix supper. I'll show you your room. I got it ready for you because I thought you and Cameron might want a few days to get to know one another before you made your vows."

Cassandra took a deep breath and was once again startled when she felt like she couldn't breathe deeply enough. "I'll follow your lead, Mrs. Royal."

Miriam frowned. "I thought we'd decided you'd call me Ma or Miriam."

"Not if we might not be related soon. It would be too informal." Cassandra felt as if her heart was breaking, when she didn't even know the man. But oh, the thoughts she'd had about him. She wasn't a bunch of malarkey, and that's all there was to it.

Chapter Three

Cassandra wasn't even sure she should let Miriam show her to the room she'd gotten ready for her, but she finally acquiesced. The older woman still needed help around the ranch, and it was the right thing to do. Besides, Cassandra owed Miriam. Her train ticket had been paid for, and there was no way she could avoid paying the older woman back somehow. Her parents had raised her right.

Cassandra found her room delightful. "It's perfect. Cozy, warm and so homey! I'll only stay long enough to pay back the cost of my fare and the money you sent for my expenses on the trip out." Unfortunately, she'd spent most of the money on food along the way. It was surprisingly expensive to eat on a train.

"You'll do no such thing. You left your job to come here, and you have to give Cameron a chance to change his mind. I know he will. You're a lovely young lady."

Cassandra had found Cameron extremely attractive, but she couldn't say that to his mother. Instead, she put her things down on the chest of drawers, and asked, "What should I do first?"

"Rest!" Miriam said. "You just arrived, and you must be exhausted."

Cassandra shook her head. "No, I need to move around. Could your garden use weeding? Or I could plant something? Anything to harvest yet?"

Miriam just smiled. "You're going to be a good daughter-in-law."

"I think you know as well as I do that's not happening. Your son

made it clear he doesn't want me here."

"He just doesn't know you yet. Once he gets to know you, he'll realize you're meant for him."

Cassandra frowned. "And you already know that?"

"I believe I do."

"We'll see," was all Cassandra could say. "Now, put me to work."

Miriam smiled. "I have a large kitchen garden, and my most hated chore is taking care of it. It desperately needs to be weeded, and someone needs to water it, but carrying a bucket of water to each plant takes so much effort."

Cassandra smiled. "You just show me this garden and where to find the water, and I'll get to work." She looked down at her dress. "I do wish I could wear trousers to garden. I think someday women will be wearing trousers all the time, and I am going to impatiently wait for it."

"I should make you a split skirt to garden in."

"I wouldn't be seen as a loose woman in a split skirt?"

"Absolutely not. You need one, and that's all there is to it." Miriam shrugged. "Besides, you don't need to try and impress Cameron. He's made it clear he has better things to do than to court you or marry you."

Cassandra chuckled softly. "You're right. He has. I would love a split skirt, but for today, I'm putting on my oldest day dress and then getting to work. I can't wait." She didn't mention that her oldest dress had a few visible patches. She'd only brought it along for scraps, but

now she was going to wear it. Who was going to care?

As soon as Miriam shut the door behind her, Cassandra changed dresses. Her mother would be scandalized if she realized Cassandra was wearing it where unmarried men could see her, but she couldn't be bothered by that.

As soon as she was finished, she found Miriam, who gave her the bucket she used for watering, showed her where the hoe and spade were, and pointed the way to the well. That was good enough for Cassandra.

She filled the huge bucket with water and carried it to the edge of the garden before taking the hoe and starting to dig up the weeds she found. She believed in doing everything the right way, so she made certain she dug all the way down to the root of each weed.

After an hour outside, she wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist, wishing she'd thought to wear a bonnet or some sort of hat. The sun was in her eyes as she worked.

She'd just started watering each plant when two men on horses stopped beside the garden. One of them smiled at her. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Cassandra Arnold. I'm here to help Mrs. Royal with her garden and other household tasks." She didn't bother to tell them she had come as a mail order bride, because what was the point? It was none of their business anyway.

"I see," the man who had asked the question said. "Do you have plans to go to the Fourth of July picnic and fireworks show tomorrow evening? It's at the church in town, and I'd be happy to be your

escort."

Cassandra smiled at him. "I'm sorry, but I promised I'd go with Mrs. Royal. Perhaps you could escort me to another event soon"

"You can count on it," he said. "I'm Wade Kelso, and I'm the foreman here at Royal River Ranch. Welcome!"

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "I'll look forward to getting to know you better."

As the two men rode away, she heard the one who had remained silent ask Wade, "You sure the boss don't have his eye on her?"

"If he did, I think she would have told me, or he would have mentioned her arrival, don't you think?"

Cassandra smiled. Perhaps she wouldn't have to earn her fare back to Massachusetts after all. She could meet someone and stay. Maybe she'd meet the man of her dreams at the picnic.

She'd just finished up watering every plant in the huge garden when Mr. Royal rode up to her. "I see you're at least earning your keep."

Cassandra straightened her back and glared at the man. "There's no reason for you to be angry with me. I'm a victim of false pretenses the same as you are."

Cameron watched her for a moment before nodding. "I guess you are. All right." He didn't apologize but instead rode off to the stable—or a building she assumed was the stable—and put his gelding away.

After staring after him for a moment, she returned to her work.

The longer she took, the more chance she gave mother and son to talk about the situation and decide what to do.

She returned all the garden tools to the spot in the small shed Mrs. Royal had shown her. Brushing her hands off, she slowly walked toward the house. She didn't want to hear a discussion about her needing to go back where she came from.

When she opened the door and stepped inside, she could see that Miriam was putting supper on the table. It was hard to call the older woman Mrs. Royal even in her mind. She was so friendly, Cassandra already felt like they were friends.

Miriam looked at her and laughed. "You weren't joking when you said you loved digging in the dirt. You are a mess, child."

"Your garden is beautiful. I truly enjoyed working in it. Is there time for me to wash up a bit and change before supper?" Cassandra did her best not to be embarrassed by the state of her appearance. It wasn't as if someone who mattered could see her.

"Absolutely. I'll give you a pitcher, and you can fill the bowl in your room and clean up in there."

"Thank you so much." Cassandra gratefully accepted the pitcher and took it upstairs to her room, where she stripped down to nothing and put on all new clothing including her underthings. Everything was covered in dirt, and she had to giggle just a little. She was a mess, and she wasn't even ashamed of it.

She took her hair down out of the bun it had been in when she arrived, though little of her blond hair remained up. Instead of fussing with it, she brushed it out and let it hang down her back. It looked

better that way anyway, and her mother wasn't there to tell her she looked like a loose woman.

She hurried down the stairs to the kitchen where she unfortunately overheard a bit of talk about herself. "Give the girl a chance, Cameron. She's feisty and sweet and the type of woman I would love to have for a daughter-in-law."

"Then I hope you have another son around. I will not marry someone who my mother found for me."

"Why not? I'm not controlled by what's in the front of your pants, and I'm sure I'll make a better decision than you will." Miriam sounded downright cross to Cassandra.

"Is that so?" he asked.

"Very much so. The last two girls you courted were dumber than a lamppost, and I know they weren't worthy of being Royals."

"Royal isn't even our real name, so how can you act like you have this family heritage that matters to you so much?"

Cassandra frowned. *Why don't they use their real name?*

"Doesn't matter whether we took our name from the river or not. We now have a Royal heritage."

He scoffed. "You're just being silly now, Ma."

"I refuse to believe I'm anything but a Royal. Everything that happened in Manhattan needs to stay right where it is. There, not here. We've made a new life together, and a bride would simply make everything complete."

He sighed. "I'll talk to her. Spend a little time with her. But if I'm not as enamored of her as you are, I'm putting her on a train right

back where she came from."

"All right," Mrs. Royal said.

Cassandra waited another minute before going into the kitchen to join them. "What can I do to help with supper?" she asked, keeping her voice cheery. They didn't need to know she'd overheard their conversation.

"You've done enough work today, dear," Mrs. Royal said with a smile. "You just sit down and let me bring you a plate. I shouldn't have let you work on the garden after being cooped up in the train for so long, and I'm angry with myself for letting you talk me into it."

"I think if you hadn't let me work in the garden, I may have needed to be sent to an asylum. I needed to reconnect with the earth after so many days in a man-made contraption."

"I bet you loved working with the children," Miriam said. "I hope you didn't spend every day with them playing in the dirt."

Cassandra shook her head, taking a seat at the table as far from Cameron as she could. "My former employers wouldn't allow me to take the children outside. They felt it was best for them to stay indoors and concentrate on scholarly pursuits. I only had one afternoon off per week, so my dirt time has been very limited."

"I can see that!" After putting the food on the table, Mrs. Royal took a seat at the opposite end from Cameron. "I'll say the blessing tonight."

Cassandra almost giggled twice during the prayer while Mrs. Royal went on and on about how thankful she was that Cassandra had arrived safely and was such a pretty young thing, perfect for bearing

her grandchildren.

When it seemed like the woman would go on forever, Cameron interrupted. “Amen.”

Mrs. Royal glared at her son. “I wasn’t to that part yet,” she said, dishing up her food onto her plate.

“You should have been.”

Cassandra enjoyed watching the two of them banter. It seemed so nice that they treated one another as equals for the most part.

After everyone’s plates had been filled, Cameron looked at Cassandra. “Where are you from?”

“A town about an hour train’s ride south of Boston. Beckham, Massachusetts.” For a moment, she thought about the people who she missed back home, but she didn’t mention them. She’d only respond when he asked a question.

“What made you decide to come west and marry a stranger?” he asked.

“A friend of mine realized that I needed to be a western wife. At least that’s what she told me, and then she showed me your letter—well, I suppose it was your mother’s letter, but I believed it to be yours. That letter made me feel that this was the perfect place for me.” She took a sip of water. “I still think this is the right place for me. I just might need to meet a man who wants a wife.”

He sighed. “You were a shock to me. I think you can understand that. I wasn’t expecting my mother to go to town in the morning and come home in the afternoon with a bride for me in tow. For now, why don’t you continue to help Ma around the house, and perhaps we can

spend some time together in the evenings. This part of Montana is beautiful, and I'd love to take drives with you or even walk with you."

She studied him for a moment before shaking her head. "I don't think we could do that. I'll make sure to earn my keep."

"Ma needs the help, but I have a feeling you enjoy gardening as much as she hates it. It'll be a good arrangement for you both."

"It would be better if there was a grandbaby involved," Mrs. Royal insisted.

Cassandra bit her lip, trying to keep her laughter inside. When the laughter won out, the others looked at her, a bit startled. But it wasn't long before all three of them were laughing. The situation was ridiculous, but it could grow into something truly special.

"I'm glad you see the humor in the situation," Cameron said. "I felt like a fool standing there trying to talk to a stranger who had come here to be my wife. Perhaps if I'd had a day or two notice it would have helped."

"Oh, pish posh! You would have just told me to leave her at the train station. Besides, it doesn't matter anymore if you marry her or not. I've decided to adopt her as my own, and her children will be my grandchildren regardless. I don't think I want them to be related to us by blood anyway."

Cassandra looked between the two of them for a moment, wondering what huge secret they were keeping between them. It was something, and she was sure it wasn't a good secret. Soon, she would know the truth.

Chapter Four

After supper, Cassandra helped with the dishes, but then she immediately went outside to work on the garden. Next year, if she was still around, she'd extend it and add more vegetables, and maybe even some raspberries. She loved raspberries, and she had a feeling Mrs. Royal could turn them into wonderful pies and jams.

She was on her knees in the garden, making a larger mound of dirt over a couple of the plants that she didn't think were buried deep enough when Cameron came out of the house and stood outside the garden watching her for a moment. She wanted to say, "Go away," but she was a guest in his house, and rudeness would be retaliated against, she was certain.

"Would you like to walk with me?" he asked. "The sun won't set for a couple of hours yet, and it would please my mother a great deal."

Cassandra sighed. "I'd have told you to go away if you hadn't mentioned your mother. She's been kind to me, and I don't want to disappoint her in any way."

He cocked his head to one side. "And I've been the opposite of kind."

"Yes, you have." She shrugged. "I'm sure it was a shock to come home and find a woman you had no idea existed living in your home, intending to marry you."

His lips twitched. "Did you know she hadn't told me?"

She shook her head. "I would have refused to go home with her

if she had. But I'm here, and I don't know what to do, so I'll stay until I can find another place to be."

He frowned. "So, you're not even willing to consider marrying me?"

"*You're* not willing to consider marrying *me*." She brushed off the front of her skirt. "Let's walk."

Cameron frowned at her. "I'm sorry I was so rude to you earlier."

"Trust me, people have been much ruder to me."

"Will your parents mind if you come back?"

She laughed. "I have ten younger siblings. I'm the oldest, and they are all still at home. I was working in town near where I grew up."

"You grew up in the country?"

Cassandra nodded, wondering why he was asking her all these questions. It didn't make sense to her. "I did. On a farm. And I've missed country living every day since I left my parents' house. But I won't return."

"What do you plan to do then?" he asked.

"I'll do as much work as I can around your ranch to earn my keep until I find somewhere else. I'm sure there's someone around who needs someone to care for their children or work in their gardens. Maybe without pay, but I won't be your burden for long." She moved her head back to look straight up at the sky. "Besides, your mother and I are going to a Fourth of July celebration in town tomorrow. I'm sure she can introduce me to some eligible men."

He frowned. “So, you won’t marry me, but you’ll marry some stranger?” That didn’t seem right.

“You’re a stranger as well. I’ll marry someone your mother approves of.”

Cameron was suddenly jealous. He didn’t know why, and he knew it made no sense at all. “You can’t marry someone else. I paid for you to come out here.”

Cassandra stopped walking and glared at him. “So, I’m intruding on your life, but I’m also not allowed to marry someone else?” She poked him in the chest. “What exactly do you think I should do then?”

“I don’t know! I still don’t know why Ma thought it was all right for her to send for you.”

She shook her head. “You make me so angry I just want to kick you.”

“Don’t,” he said softly, watching her. He couldn’t believe how much fire she had inside her.

She looked to make certain they were well away from the house. “I was just as shocked as you were that I wasn’t here to marry you. It’s my life that’s been upended. I’m the one who just sat in a train car all the way across this great nation of ours. My backside hurts from all that travel. You will stop acting as if I’m intruding on your life!”

He couldn’t help but laugh. She had so much fire, but she was so much smaller than him. Her anger was simply amusing. “Is that so?”

“It is!” She shook her head. “No wonder you’re not married. You’re not fit for a woman to walk on, let alone kiss.” She turned away from him to head back to the house. His mother should have

seen that they walked together. Now she'd get back to her gardening, her duty complete.

He caught her shoulder, spinning her back toward him. "With your anger problems, it's no surprise that you aren't married. No man would put up with that!"

She raised her hand to slap him, but he caught it in his hand. "Let go of me, you brute!"

Instead of letting her go, Cameron lowered his lips to hers and kissed the anger right off her lips. He held her there, and while she expected his kiss to be punishing, it was soft and gentle.

It didn't take long at all for her to melt against him and return his kiss. He was still holding one of her hands, but Cassandra moved the other to his shoulder, hanging on to him for dear life.

When he raised his head, he looked just as stunned as she felt. "I guess I'm fit to kiss after all."

Cassandra had nothing to say to that, so she pulled her hand from his grip and headed back toward the house. The man was insufferable, and she had no desire to spend even another minute in his company.

She went to the garden and knelt in the same spot she'd been in, and she worked, but her mind was no longer focused on the vegetables in the garden. No, she was too busy thinking about how much she enjoyed kissing him.

Never having been kissed before, she didn't know if it was normal to like it that much, but perhaps she was a loose woman, who enjoyed kissing every man who came along. She'd never had the

opportunity to know any differently.

When she heard footsteps approach, she didn't even turn to acknowledge him. Instead, she kept working, her head down. "Good to see you again!" a man's voice said.

Cassandra turned to see the same man who had come by earlier. "Oh, hello!"

Wade watched her for a moment. "You really enjoy working in the garden, don't you?"

"I do. I'm a farmer's daughter, and I'm proud of it."

He grinned. "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

She took a deep breath. Why not? She needed to find out if she was compatible with the man anyway, and he was a great deal nicer than Cameron was. "I'd like that. Let's not go that way, though," she said, pointing in the direction Cameron had taken her.

Wade shrugged. "That's all right. I'll walk whichever direction you'd like," he said, offering a hand to help her to her feet.

"You don't want to touch me. I'm filthy from my time in the garden."

"Oh, that doesn't bother me a bit, Miss Arnold."

She took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. She liked this man. Instead of walking further onto the ranch, he led her toward the road. "How long have you worked for Mr. Royal?"

"Eight years now. I was his first hand when he started this operation." He walked along beside her but didn't crowd her the way some men had.

"So, you've known him for a very long time. I really enjoy being

around Mrs. Royal. She's very kind."

"She is, but she's also a bit of a meddler."

Cassandra bit her lip, but she decided to confess her situation. She liked Wade, and maybe if he knew what was happening, he would be interested in more than just walking with her in the evening. "She sent for a mail-order bride on Mr. Royal's behalf. He came home for a bit today, and he had no idea who I was. Now I'm just helping out in the garden and around the house. He has no desire to marry me. He's made that abundantly clear."

"Then he's not as smart as I've given him credit for." Wade shook his head. "If you're looking for a man to step into his shoes and marry you, don't look any further! Please!"

Cassandra laughed. "I'm going to think long and hard before I agree to marry someone else. I'm in a good place, and I don't have to hurry anything."

"Well, know that I'll wait as long as you feel the need to wait."

She wanted to ask him to kiss her, so she could see if she just liked kisses or if there was something special about Cameron's, but she didn't dare. Maybe eventually.

He stopped at the side of the road and picked a flower for her. She took it and sniffed deeply. "Thank you. Is it a cornflower?"

"It is! You know your flowers."

Cassandra smiled. "I do. If I haven't physically seen one, then I've seen pictures in books. I've read more gardening books than any woman should ever admit to. I prefer fruit and vegetable gardens because they provide food, but I love flowers as well."

“You read?” he asked, looking surprised.

She nodded. “Yes, I went to school all the way through eighth grade.” She’d have gone longer, but it was the highest grade her school had offered.

“I had no idea. I think that’s wonderful.”

“You don’t?” she asked. She didn’t mind if he couldn’t, but it would be good to know.

He shook his head. “I never had the opportunity to learn.”

“Would you like me to teach you?” she asked. She was more than willing.

“I don’t know…what if I’m not smart enough to learn?”

“You are. I promise.” They turned on the road then and headed back toward the house. She was glad because exhaustion was setting in. “Why don’t we plan to work together after supper in the evenings? I’ll sit with you and teach you your letters and the sounds they make.”

“They’re my letters? Why aren’t they *your* letters?”

Cassandra laughed. “I think I like you.”

“I know I like you. And I’ll take you up on your offer. I’ll be at the house every evening after supper.” He grinned. “I might sweet talk Mrs. Royal into a supper invite for every night as well.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” she said. “Then we could spend more time together getting to know one another.”

When they reached the house, he smiled at her, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. “Thank you for the lovely walk, and the sweet offer,” he said. “I won’t come for reading lessons tomorrow with it being the fourth and all, but I’ll come the next evening, if you’ll

have me."

"I would enjoy it a great deal. I'll talk to Mrs. Royal about it."

"And I hope you'll save me a dance at the Fourth of July picnic and fireworks."

"There will be dancing?" she asked. "I've never really learned to dance. I went to a few dances back home, but I always stood in the corner and watched."

Wade sighed. "A woman as beautiful as you should never be a wallflower." With a wave, he turned away, and she wondered where the man slept. Was there a bunkhouse or something? She'd have to ask Mrs. Royal.

When she went inside, she saw that Cameron and his mother were sitting at the table. "Who were you with?" Mrs. Royal asked, a sly smile on her face.

Cassandra shrugged. "Wade asked me for a walk, and I accepted. He seems like a very nice man."

"Oh, he is, dear. He'd make you a wonderful husband."

"I was thinking along the same lines," Cassandra agreed. "How would you feel if he started coming over in the evenings after supper? I want to teach him to read, and he's agreed."

"Of course, he has," Cameron muttered. "Man's not a fool."

"No, he didn't seem to be a fool at all," Cassandra said with a smile. "If you don't mind, I'll be off to bed. I haven't slept lying down in over a week, and I'm very excited at the prospect. It's funny the things that you don't think you'll miss are the first things you want back. I will never take sleeping in a real bed for granted again."

“Good,” Mrs. Royal said. “Sleep well. If you need anything, feel free to just look for it.”

“Thank you! Goodnight.” As she hurried up the stairs, Cassandra found herself humming happily to herself.

As she went into her room, she glanced in the small mirror above the washbowl, and she giggled. She was a mess. Her hair was going in every direction, and she had dirt smeared across her nose. Her mother would have a fit if she knew she’d walked with two men in one evening with dirt on her nose. She was happy to be in the west though because her penchant for dirt didn’t seem to bother anyone.

She set her cornflower on the dresser provided, and she smiled at it once more. She’d never imagined a man would want to court her with flowers and gifts. The men she’d known just wanted her help planting flowers for the girls they liked, who of course hadn’t been her. Why would they like her?

As soon as school was out every day, she’d walked home barefoot, as long as the weather was fine. She would then be covered with dirt up to her knees, and the boys would laugh at her, but she’d never minded. And here? No one seemed to mind. She should be able to find a husband who would love her for who she was.

She needed to sit down and write Elizabeth Tandy immediately, so Elizabeth would know how well she fit in.

She changed into her nightgown and fell into the bed that was so prettily made. It was a little too…well, feminine for Cassandra’s taste, but it was a place to sleep and that’s all she cared about at the moment.

She prayed to thank God for getting her to her destination safely, and that there was a place on earth for women like her. Women who didn't fit into the mold all men seemed to want to cram women into. Instead, she was her own person, an original if you will. And she was somewhere that she would be respected for that.

She wasn't able to stay awake long enough to continue her prayer. Instead, her mind kept drifting away, and she finally fell asleep in the middle of it.

Chapter Five

Cameron had a difficult time sleeping that night. His reaction to Cassandra's arrival had been more than a little rude, but as the day wore on, he found he was more and more attracted to her. He wanted to tell all the men in the area that he had first right of refusal. He got to decide if he married her or not.

Her reaction to his kiss…that would keep his daydreams alive for a good long while. The woman was full of fire, which he'd realized several times. At first, he'd thought the fire was simply anger toward him, but no. It was more. She was passionate and beautiful. She wasn't afraid to work and get her hands dirty.

The perfect companion for his mother and wife for him had arrived, and he'd rejected her without giving her a chance. And now, she was doing the same to him. He deserved it, and he realized it with every fiber of his being, but…he didn't want her to marry someone else.

As he lay awake, staring at the ceiling in his bedroom, he decided he would make a true effort with her. Wade had picked her a flower, so he'd pick her a hundred. He would spend time with her and get to know her, just as his mother had suggested. Surely, she'd see that she was the right woman for him, and more than that, that he was the right man for her.

He had so much more to offer her than Wade ever would. A future that was financially secure and a prominent position in their small town. He'd have said a prominent position in society, but that's

what it would have been called back in New York City, and he was happy not to be there anymore.

The only thing that worried him was whether he'd have his father's temper. If so…well, then he wouldn't be able to keep a wife. He would work on it every day of his life, if only Cassandra—*his* mail order bride—would agree to marry him.

Cassandra was up well before the sun the following morning, so she decided to go out and deal with the morning farm chores. She collected eggs and milked both cows that were kept in the barn, returning to the kitchen with the milk just as Mrs. Royal was coming into the kitchen to cook breakfast.

"Would you like me to fix breakfast?" Cassandra asked. She wasn't nearly as fond of cooking as she was of working outside, but she could scramble eggs and make pancakes as well as anyone else.

"No, thank you. I genuinely enjoy cooking. Thank you for the milk and eggs though. Would you mind going upstairs and tapping on the first door on the left to let Cameron know that he doesn't need to milk the cows or gather eggs. He'll be able to sleep a few minutes later, and that will make him happy."

"Of course," Cassandra said, though she had no desire to come into contact with the surly man. She hurried up the stairs, and knocked softly, surprised when Cameron came to the door with just a pair of Levi's on. "Your mother said to let you know you don't need to milk the cows or gather eggs." It was all she could do to keep her eyes on his face and not his bare chest.

“Is that so? You doin’ my work for me then?”

She shrugged. “I was just trying to help. Earn my keep so to speak.”

He sighed. “Let’s start over. I should never have said the things I said yesterday, so we’ll start with you being introduced to me in my house as my mail-order bride. Does that work?”

She tilted her head to one side and studied him. “Why?”

“Because I made a big mistake. Because I’m incredibly attracted to you, and I want to marry you. I just needed a few hours to get used to the idea.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to work. I have another suitor now, and he’s been a great deal more kind to me than you have.” Cassandra turned away so she wouldn’t have to look at his chest for even another minute, and then she hurried down the stairs. He was so…handsome without his shirt, his morning growth of beard waiting to be shaved. She needed to be careful not to be alone with the man any more than absolutely necessary.

She set the table for Mrs. Royal, not even looking up when Cameron came down and sat at the table. “I’ve given most of the men the day off to go to the picnic and fireworks,” he said, his eyes constantly following Cassandra.

“Good. That will give Cassandra the opportunity to meet a great deal of men today. I’m sure she’ll find one that suits her fancy.”

He frowned. “I don’t want her to find another man. I’ve decided to marry her, Ma.”

Mrs. Royal spun away from the stove and waved her spatula in

the air. “You will do no such thing unless she agrees to it. And you’re not going to force her. You hear me?”

“I hear you. I’m not going to force her. I’m going to convince her that I’m the man she wants to spend her life with.”

“After the way you talked to her yesterday, I’m not certain she’s going to agree at all. Good luck with that, son.” Cassandra spotted a grin on Mrs. Royal’s face as she turned away from her son. There was no doubt in her mind that Mrs. Royal was on her side.

After breakfast, Cameron said, “I’ll hitch up the buggy to take you ladies into town when we’re ready. There’s no reason to take the farm wagon when we can go in style.”

Mrs. Royal stared at him for a moment. “I can’t remember the time you hitched up the buggy. I’ve asked you every Sunday for years.”

He shrugged. “I hitch up the sleigh when it’s too snowy for the wagon.”

Cassandra watched the two of them, wondering what game Cameron was playing. The man had clearly not wanted her there not twenty-four hours ago, and now he was being kind. It was…odd to say the least.

After breakfast, Cassandra helped Mrs. Royal make fried chicken for the picnic. “It’s a potluck picnic,” the older woman told her. “Everyone will take something, and I always try to supply some sort of meat, because not many of the women do.” She smiled at Cassandra. “There are always many more bachelors than there are families and women, so the food has to stretch. I usually make about ten times

what my son and I will eat, so there's enough to go around."

"Sounds good to me," Cassandra said.

Mrs. Royal eyed Cassandra. "Do you want to take a basket and pick some of the wild berries? If you walk along the path past those trees, you'll find blackberries and raspberries just growing happily on both sides of the walkway. It's a bit of a walk, but I know you'd rather be out there than in here. I'll make as many pies as you can bring me berries for."

Cassandra smiled. "I would love to do that."

Cameron walked into the kitchen then, and Mrs. Royal smiled. "Cameron, I was just sending Cassandra out to pick some of the berries along the side of the path. Would you mind showing her where they are?"

"I would love to," he said, hoping it would be a good chance for the girl to see him for who he was, and not for the angry man she'd met the day before.

Cassandra wanted to refuse to go with him, but she was living in his home, and he'd paid for her train ticket to Montana. She couldn't be so rude as to refuse to walk with him. "Where can I find a basket, Mrs. Royal?"

"Put a towel in the egg basket you used this morning. It's easier than anything else."

"Yes, ma'am." Cassandra took the basket and did as she was told, and then went outside, Cameron right behind her.

"This should be fun," he said, smiling at her.

"You may think so, but I reserve the right to form my own

opinion of our time together."

He shrugged. "Would it help if I got down on my knees and apologized?"

"No, it wouldn't. Now if you could go back to yesterday and change how you treated me, that would be wonderful."

He led the way to the path without another word. He could tell she was attracted to him. There must be a way to convince her that he wasn't the ogre she saw him as.

Walking along to the berries, he talked about different things along the way, and about nothing. "Ma makes the best blackberry pie you ever tasted," he said. "I love when she takes the time to pick berries, but it doesn't happen nearly often enough for my tastes."

"Blackberry pie is a favorite of mine," she admitted grudgingly. "Will she make raspberry pie as well?"

He nodded. "Sometimes she mixes them together. I have a sweet tooth, and my ma sure knows how to keep me happy."

"She said she loves to cook. I prefer to be outside gardening or just exploring."

"I'll have to build you a pit where you can cook outside. The pioneers who came here on the Oregon Trail cooked over a campfire, but if I make a big firepit, you'll be able to cook outside as much as you want."

"Don't bother. I don't plan on being around long enough to use a firepit," she said softly.

"Would you give me a chance?" he asked. "I know I messed up, and I know Wade wants to court you, but would you let me court you

as well? You can choose between us. Maybe we each have until August first, and whoever you think will make the best husband then will be the winner."

"I refuse to be anyone's prize!" But if Cassandra were honest with herself, she liked the idea. She wanted to touch Cameron as they walked along together. There was no desire to touch Wade. But perhaps that was because Cameron had kissed her first?

"I didn't mean it that way," he said. "I meant you could choose between us, so I guess you'd be choosing your own prize, and you'd win either way."

She laughed. "You sure do know how to make me think, don't you?"

"I seem to be better at making you angry," he responded.

Stopping to start filling the basket, she was aware that Cameron was beside her, helping her pick the berries. "Perhaps we should put the blackberries in the basket, and I can put the raspberries in my apron," she said.

"Nah. Ma will just have us separate them when we get back." He put a hand on her arm. "Give me a chance?"

Finally, she nodded. "All right. You may court me, but you must agree to abide by my decision when August first comes."

"Of course. And I'll talk to Wade and get him to agree as well."

"Thank you." She felt her stomach flutter at the idea of him courting her. His kiss had made her want to swoon, and now he was telling her he wanted to court her and marry her. Sure, he'd said horrible things the day before, but… Maybe that really wasn't who he

was.

His arm kept brushing hers as they put berries into the basket, and as soon as there were enough berries for it to be a little bit heavy, he took the basket from her, hooking it over his arm. “How many should we pick?” she finally asked. She wanted to stand there with him forever, not talking, but instead just feeling him beside her. If the man would talk less, she knew she’d like him a great deal more.

When the basket was full, he offered her his free arm, and she took it, her hand wanting to dwell on the wiry muscles there. It was obvious he was more than just a boss to his men. He worked right alongside them, and he worked hard.

As they walked back, he asked, “What about your family? Tell me about them.”

She shrugged. “I think I told you I’m the oldest of eleven children. There are six boys and four girls younger than me. My father is a farmer, and my mother doesn’t like being outside…at all! When they met, she had no desire to be a farmer’s wife. She was the daughter of one of the bankers in town. But she fell in love. When I was little, she taught me how to plant and harvest a kitchen garden. She was pregnant with one of my siblings—I can’t remember which—and it was hard for her to bend. So, I did it for her, and I did it until I grew up and moved away. I used to get in trouble at school because I was always taking off my shoes and socks at recess. Every time we had a new teacher—which seemed to be every semester—they would get onto me, but finally, they’d give up.”

“Why did you have a different teacher every semester?” he

asked, enjoying listening to her talk.

"Neighbor kids," she said. "There was this family who was full of mischief makers. All the townspeople called the children the demon horde. They went to my school, and when they weren't putting a snake in the teacher's desk or hiding a dead animal in the coal caddy, they were tying her into the outhouse. I'm surprised teachers stayed for entire semesters."

"Sounds like the Cauldron boys. They're over in Cauldron Valley, and those boys get into so much mischief, it's hard to know what to do."

She smiled. "Sounds like they are cut from the same cloth as the demon horde. I'm always amazed that every one of them is growing into a sensible, responsible adult."

"The same with the Cauldrons!" he said with a grin. "One of them even became a preacher."

Laughing, she told him, "None of the demon horde have yet, but their older sister is the matchmaker who sent me here. She's married to a wonderful, kind man who does so much for people in town."

"So, she's someone you trust?"

"Oh, yes. I'd trust her with my life. I guess I did when I came out here to marry a man I'd never met before." She shrugged. "Her husband investigates all the men who send letters."

Cameron looked pale at her words. "I was investigated?"

She nodded. "I didn't do it, but yes, you were investigated. I guess they didn't find anything wrong with you. They must not have found out you didn't want a bride." Her eyes danced as she said the

words, and he smiled, but the smile looked forced.

They must not have found out the truth.

Back at the house, Mrs. Royal had made three pie crusts, and she smiled at the sheer number of berries. “I’m going to have to send you two out there again. You’re good at berry picking.”

Cassandra smiled. “I love berry picking. My neighbors used to pick apples, climb trees, and throw apples at me while I was picking them though. It feels so much easier doing them without having someone use me for target practice.”

Cameron shook his head. “Where were their parents through all this?”

“They both worked usually. Elizabeth and her older sister, Susan, were the ones in charge of them, but they were impossible to control.” Cassandra shrugged. “The teachers couldn’t control them either. I think that’s why I liked them so much.”

“Does anyone ever call you Cassie?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No one ever has.”

“I think I’m going to start calling you Sassy Cassie. It fits you so well!”

She laughed, not missing Mrs. Royal’s look of excitement that they were getting along. “Do you mind if I go upstairs and get my Sunday dress so I can press it?”

“You’re not a servant here, Cassandra,” Mrs. Royal said. “You go get your pretty dress, and press it, and I’ll make these pies.”

“Shouldn’t I be helping?”

“No, you picked the berries. Go. Think of all the men you’ll

meet!" Mrs. Royal cast a sly glance at her son, who scowled.

As soon as Cassandra had disappeared up the stairs, Cameron told his mother what Cassandra had said. "That company you hired to send me a bride? They investigated me!"

Mrs. Royal turned white, putting down the berries she was mixing with sugar. "What? Do you know what they discovered?"

He shook his head. "No, but I seem to have passed their check, because they sent her out here to marry me, and she is friends with the owner of the company."

"They didn't tell her anything negative about you?"

"Not that I know of, and I think she would have said something." He took a deep breath. "Maybe we covered our tracks better than we thought."

"I certainly hope so." She picked up the berries and resumed stirring. "I don't want you to get into any kind of trouble simply because I want some grandbabies."

"We're okay right now. I'll see if the sheriff acts a little odd at the picnic today." He frowned. "Please do not run around introducing Cassandra to all the men there. She's agreed to let me and Wade both court her, and she'll make a decision between us on August first."

"I'm surprised she forgave you that easily."

"Well, she did. Now if you'll just keep your nose out of things, I think we'll do well."

"If I'd kept my nose out of things, she wouldn't be here in the first place," she said. "But I'll try. Are you worried about Wade as a competitor for her hand?"

He shrugged. “I know that Wade is probably more well-mannered than I am with her, but I can give her a much better life than he can. She seems smart enough that she’ll take that into account.”

“I hope you’re right. She’s the perfect mother for my grandchildren.”

“She is.” He looked at his mother. “How much longer until you have everything ready to go.”

“A few hours. We’ll have sandwiches here, and then we’ll feast for supper with everything people bring to the potluck.”

“Sounds good. Bacon sandwiches?” The picnic started around five in the evening every year, and they would stay until the sun set and the fireworks were set off. There would be three-legged races, sack races, tug of war, and many other games to keep them busy all day. It was one of his favorite holidays because of the way the town celebrated.

Once it was time to leave, Cassandra walked down the stairs, a vision in a pale blue dress with her hair pulled back, but still tumbling down. “You’re beautiful,” he said without thinking. He wanted to court her, but he didn’t know how to court a woman. The words just slipped out.

Cassandra smiled. “Well, aren’t you kind?” She went to the kitchen and helped Ma get the food carried out to the buggy. They put everything on the back seat and on the floor of the buggy in the back.

Cameron helped her into the backseat, where she insisted upon sitting. It was only right that his mother sat in the front with him. As

they drove the opposite way from where they'd come the day before, Cassandra craned her neck looking in every direction. It was such a beautiful valley they were in, and she wanted to live there forever. Perhaps she should claim her own homestead.

As soon as the thought popped into her head, she stifled a giggle. She could just imagine how Cameron would react if she decided to marry neither of the men and start her own farm instead.

When they got to the church, he helped his mother down first, and then Cassandra. Together, the two women carried the food to the table that had been set out for that purpose.

Several men approached, hats in hand, to meet Cassandra, but Cameron was quick to take her arm, glaring at the men until they backed away. "You can't do that every time a man walks toward me," she said.

"Only until you're nine months pregnant with our first child and no men care to approach," he agreed.

She blushed, shaking her head. "For a man who didn't even want to look at me yesterday, you certainly do seem smitten today."

"All the men are smitten with you. You're new and you're beautiful. In a land where there are more men than women, that's just how it's going to be." He offered her his arm and they walked away from the table.

When Wade came toward her, he stopped a few yards away with a frown. "I thought…"

It was everything Cameron could do to be honest with his friend and let him know what the arrangement was. "We're both going to

court her," he said softly. "On August first, she'll choose one of us to marry."

Wade looked back and forth between the two of them before nodding. "I hope you'll save me at least one dance."

"She's with me today."

Cassandra turned toward him. "I'm with *your mother* today. You may each have one dance if you don't mind having your feet trampled."

Cameron couldn't help but grin. She truly was sassy. "All right," he agreed, but he knew he'd be warning Wade off in a bit. She was his that day, whether she'd admit it or not.

After lunch, the men and children signed up for different games while the women agreed to cheer different men on. Instead of cheering for one of them, she gave each a ribbon from her hair. "In medieval times, a woman would give her favorite man a favor before he jousted. You're both equal, so you both get a ribbon."

Wade smiled, taking the ribbon and tucking it into his pocket, letting one end of it trail out of his pocket.

Cameron looked at the ribbon she'd given him and wanted to hide it somewhere, but when Wade acted like it was a huge honor to receive a ribbon, he had to do the same. "Would you tie it around my wrist so everyone can see it?" he asked.

The smile on Cassandra's face was reward enough. She looked positively thrilled that he wanted to display it so prominently. So, she carefully tied it to his wrist and smiled. "There you are."

"How about a kiss for luck?" he asked.

Cassandra blushed. “I don’t think so…”

“But we *have* kissed,” he said softly, so only Wade would hear him. He knew he was playing dirty, but he couldn’t stop himself. Wade was his friend, but he planned to spend his life with this woman.

“Hush!” she said, blushing even harder.

The words hit home, and he saw Wade frown. Obviously, they hadn’t kissed yet. *Score one for Royal!*

“What is the first contest?” Cassandra asked, changing the subject.

“Sack race,” Cameron said. “Should be fun.”

“I’ll be cheering for you both,” she said, refusing to let the man feel like he’d won. He was exasperating, but oh, did she want to be kissed by him again.

As the men took their spots at the starting line, Cassandra took a spot at the finish line. She wanted to be there to cheer on whoever won. There were six other men in the race, and any of them could win of course, but her money was on Cameron. He was…well, he was just someone she would expect to win everything.

As she watched she knew she was right. Wade was a close second, but at the end, he was edged out by Cameron. She cheered for both men right up until the end, but when Cameron won, she ran to him and hugged him in congratulations. As soon as she’d done so, she realized she’d made a mistake. All the other men would assume she was a loose woman if she was running around hugging.

She returned to Mrs. Royal’s side, and they watched the rest of

the competitions together. “I may have gotten a little too excited.”

“You did,” Mrs. Royal said, a twinkle in her eye. “But you could marry Cameron before we leave, and no one would think a thing.”

“That wouldn’t be fair to Wade.”

“No, it wouldn’t. But Wade wasn’t the one responsible for bringing you here.”

Cassandra looked at Mrs. Royal. “No, that was you.”

“But I used Cameron’s money, so it was really him.”

Laughing and shaking her head, Cassandra said, “You really do like to have things your own way, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do! Who doesn’t?”

After all the games, three men took their positions in a gazebo there on the church lawn. Each held a different instrument. There was a guitar, a harmonica, and a fiddle.

As the music started, Cameron magically appeared in front of Cassandra, holding out a hand for her. “I missed having you cheer for me during the other competitions,” he said softly.

“I think I was a little too enthusiastic the first time, and I didn’t want to get a bad reputation.”

“I suppose you’re right. Of course, you could marry me before we leave today, and then no one would think a thing of it.”

“Your mother said the exact same thing.” It was odd how much the two of them seemed to think alike. Cassandra went into Cameron’s arms, and she trampled his feet like she was a herd of buffalo, and he was a patch of grass.

As they danced, he didn’t talk much, because he was afraid it

would be detrimental to his well-being. He supposed he shouldn't keep dancing with her, but having her in his arms…well, it was the best part of his favorite day of the whole year.

After their dance, Wade came and took her hand for the second dance. As soon as he took her into his arms, Cassandra knew. She had no feelings for Wade. When he touched her, her stomach didn't feel as if there was a tornado inside trying to get out. She didn't feel weak in the knees. Wade made her feel nothing, and Cameron made her feel… well, things an unmarried young lady shouldn't be feeling.

She trampled Wade's feet as badly as she had Cameron's, and he only winced twice from the pain she caused. Afterward, she said, "Could we walk? I want to say something."

"Yes, of course."

"Cameron apologized for the way he treated me when we spent time together this morning, and he asked me if he could court me. When I agreed, I was planning to let him court me until the end of the month, but…I realized when you held me that I don't feel the same way for both of you."

Wade sighed. "You have feelings for him, and not for me."

"I'm so sorry. I would rather have feelings for you because you're kinder. But…I can't change the way I feel."

"No, I don't suppose you can. Will you marry him?"

She nodded. "I will. I'll probably go tell him now. But I still want to teach you to read if you'll let me."

He looked reluctant for a moment, but then he said. "I'd like that a lot. Especially since it will probably annoy Cameron."

She laughed. “That’s the spirit!”

“I wish things were different, but I’m glad you told me as soon as you realized.”

“So am I. I could never lead you on and make you feel like you have a chance when you don’t.”

“Let’s go back. I’ll be there after supper tomorrow for my reading lesson.”

“I’d like that!” Cassandra really did like the idea of teaching him to read. She liked the idea of making a difference, and it felt like teaching even one person to read might touch many lives. If he could read, then he could read to his future children and teach them. So many worlds opened up when you could read.

When they got back to the others, Cassandra spotted a crate just behind Cameron. “Oh, there are kittens!” She hurried over and picked one of them up, choosing the tortoise shell over the others, and rubbing its cheek with her own before snuggling it under her chin. Turning, she looked at Mrs. Royal. “I’ve always wanted a kitten, but they made my mother sneeze.”

Mrs. Royal smiled. “I adore kittens as well. The only person I know who doesn’t like them is my grumpy son.”

Cassandra sighed. “I won’t ask for one. It’s nice to just be able to cuddle with one for a moment.”

Cameron shook his head, walking to the man behind her. “How much for the kittens?”

“Ten dollars,” the man said.

“That’s highway robbery! You can’t expect me to pay that.”

“There aren’t a lot of cats around here, and people need good mousers. You don’t want it, then I’m sure someone else will. I’ve been here for ten minutes and already sold the first two.”

Cameron groaned, but he pulled out some money, and handed it to the other man. “Happy now?” he asked Cassandra.

Her face gave him the answer he was looking for. She was thrilled. “Yes! So happy!”

“Maybe it’ll help my chances.”

Cassandra stroked the kitten with one finger. “Is it a boy or girl?”

He took the kitten and turned it over. “It’s a girl.”

“I’m calling her Minerva then. Minnie for short.” She snuggled the kitten once more and then looked at him. “I just told Wade he no longer has a chance. I’ve chosen you.”

He stood and stared at her for a moment. “You told him that *before* I bought you the kitten?”

She nodded. “Yes, but isn’t it a wonderful wedding gift?”

He groaned. “I’m sure it is.”

Mrs. Royal clapped in excitement. There was no doubt it was what she had been hoping for all along. “Then you’ll have to call me Ma!” she said to Cassandra.

“Yes, I guess I will.” Cassandra smiled and hugged the older woman. The time since she’d gotten off the train had been very emotional for her, but it seemed to all be settling down.

Cameron grabbed her arm. “Where’s the pastor? We’re getting hitched before she changes her mind again.”

“You changed my mind for me,” she reminded him.

“Don’t care. Finding the pastor.” Wade pointed in the direction of the church building, and he pulled her in that direction. “You coming, Ma?”

Mrs. Royal hurried behind them. “Sure am.”

Wade hurried behind Mrs. Royal. “You’re not leaving me out!” he called.

Cameron sighed. “I don’t care who watches as long as this woman is tied to me before we go home tonight.”

“What a way to treat the woman you’re about to marry!” Cassandra protested. “I thought you were going to try to be romantic.” She still clutched the tiny kitten beneath her chin.

“Why would I need to be romantic when you already said you’d marry me?” he asked.

“Cameron!” His mother said from behind them. “I’ve taught you better than that.”

“I guess.” He sighed. “Won’t you go before the pastor with me so we can vow to love one another forever?”

Cassandra couldn’t help but laugh. The man was a pain in her backside, but she really did like him.

When they got to the pastor, Cameron quickly explained the situation.

“You want to get married now?” the pastor asked. “In the middle of our dance?”

“Yes!” Cameron replied, wondering if there was something wrong with the pastor that he didn’t understand the situation. “I’d like to be married an hour ago.”

The pastor looked at the kitten Cassandra was holding. “I don’t really allow animals in my church…”

Cassandra frowned. “I promise, I will hold her the entire time. Besides, look how sweet and docile she is.”

“I never thought I’d see a bride holding a kitten instead of flowers.” Finally, he shook his head and started the ceremony. “Dearly beloved…”

They responded appropriately throughout the ceremony, and the pastor finally pronounced them “man and wife.” It wasn’t a minute too soon in Cameron’s eyes. He caught Cassandra by the hips and pulled her against him, kissing her passionately.

Cassandra rose on her toes pressing her entire body to his and kissed him back for all she was worth. She was excited about the next part of their marriage—the part that happened in the bedroom. No one who made her feel as good as Cameron did could hurt a woman.

It wasn't possible.

Finally, Mrs. Royal cleared her throat. "That's enough of that," she said, shaking her head. "I think I'm glad my room is on the ground floor, and you two will be upstairs."

Cassandra knew she should blush, but it was normal behavior. She'd observed animals her entire life, and she knew every creature procreated somehow. There was nothing wrong with enjoying her husband's touch.

For the rest of the day, they sat together, and then sat and watched the fireworks. He didn't ask her to dance again, and when she asked why, his response only amused her. "I think I need to be in once piece for the wedding night. I don't need to be trampled half to death."

She giggled. "I told you I was a terrible dancer."

"You were right," he said, shaking his head. "But I married you anyway." He smiled at her, trying not to let his mind run away with him. All he could think about was their wedding night, but if he thought about it too much, people would be able to tell by how tight his Levi's were.

"I guess you did."

His mother beamed at them, obviously thrilled her matchmaking had worked. "I knew the instant I saw her you two would be happy together."

"You hoped so," Cameron replied. "You'd have had a hard time explaining why a stranger was living in our house otherwise."

Cassandra ignored them both as she watched the kitten

gamboling around on the ground in front of them. She would whisk between them with a happy little skip to her walk, and then after a few minutes, she'd be tired, and she would climb Cassandra's skirt into her lap. Over and over, it happened.

Little Minnie climbed into her lap and meowed loudly at her. "I don't have any food, baby. I'll get you something as soon as we're home."

Mrs. Royal came to the rescue with some of the chicken that was left from supper. "There's only one more piece, but I saved it, thinking one of us might get hungry. I think we found who's hungry."

Cameron took the chicken from his mother, and broke off small pieces of it, eating the breading himself. Cassandra fed the pieces to Minnie, and the kitten made suckling sounds as she ate the meat.

"She's so precious." Cassandra looked at Cameron. "Thank you for giving me the most wonderful gift I've ever received."

He smiled, feeling as if he'd done something good with her for a change. The kitten certainly did make her happy. "You're not planning to sleep with that thing, are you?"

She looked at him in horror. "Of course, I am! She's my baby!"

Mrs. Royal peeked at Cassandra around her son. "I want a two-legged baby before too terribly long."

Cassandra laughed. "I really don't think that's going to be a problem."

After the fireworks show, which was much smaller than the ones back in Beckham, but so much more special to her, they left the church in the buggy. Once again Cassandra sat in the back, but this

time she had the kitten nestled happily under her chin. She realized the kitten made her feelings for Cameron turn from something just physical to something more…well, something more. She felt very appreciative of the small gift, and she knew she would have so much love to give little Minnie.

They went into the house, and Cameron sighed when she took her baby up the stairs and showed her his bedroom. “I don’t want to sleep with a cat,” he said.

“Well, she’s going to be afraid since she’s away from her brothers and sisters and her mama. No, she really needs me.” She set the kitten on the floor, and immediately felt her skirt being climbed. Whether he protested or not she was sleeping with the kitten. If it meant not sleeping with *him*, so be it!

“Where will it defecate?” he asked, trying to be practical.

Cassandra frowned. “I’ll leave the window open. There’s a tree just outside she can climb down.”

“I really don’t like that idea,” he said, looking at the kitten like he was sure he’d lost his mind for purchasing it.

“You’re grumpy,” she said, carefully reaching through the window and putting the kitten in the tree so she could explore.

Minnie climbed from branch to branch, but then she jumped back into the windowsill, letting out a loud meow. There was no question who she wanted to hold her.

“You know it’s our wedding night, right?”

Cassandra nodded. “I do. And I plan to fully participate as soon as I get Minnie to fall asleep.”

“You’re going to make me wait until she’s asleep?” Cameron had always heard that a man had to be long-suffering, but he hadn’t expected it to start on his wedding night.

“I can’t ignore her simply because you want to have relations with me. Let’s get her settled in.” She was fully aware that most women wouldn’t mention relations to their new husband, but she just didn’t care. Why would she tiptoe around the subject?

She hurried to the room she’d slept in the night before, pulling a drawer from the chest of drawers, and taking the quilt from the bed. She tucked the quilt into the drawer, and then carried the whole thing into the bedroom she would share with Cameron. “There we go. A perfect kitten bed.”

He looked at the bed, and then he looked at his new wife, who was living up to the nickname Sassy Cassie. “I think you’ve lost your mind.”

“Well, of course I have. What sane woman would travel across the country to marry a stranger?” she asked, sitting on the floor beside the makeshift cat bed.

Minnie let out another loud meow and climbed out of the drawer and straight to Cassandra.

“I think she misses her family,” Cassandra said softly, carefully stroking the kitten’s nose. “I should keep holding her.”

Cameron sat down on the side of the bed and stared at her helplessly. He was glad she was so happy with the kitten, but…He wanted a wedding night. “How long do you think it’ll take for her to fall asleep?”

She shrugged. “Not long. Remember how much she’d play and then sleep at the fireworks? I’m certain she’ll do the same here.”

The kitten meowed contentedly and slowly fell asleep. As soon as Cassandra was certain she was asleep, she put the kitten into the bed she’d made for her. The kitten started kneading the quilt, and she began suckling at it. “She’s too young to be away from her mama.” Her heart went out to the tiny creature.

“And I’m getting older by the second as I wait for my bride to remove her clothes!” Cameron tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice, but she was spending too much time with the kitten for his comfort.

Cassandra laughed. “No problem!” Without another word, she began unbuttoning her dress at the back, not worried at all about being nude in front of her husband for the first time. She knew that he was interested in her sexually, and there was nothing to keep her from doing as she wanted with him.

In seconds, she stood in front of him in nothing but moonlight, and he swallowed hard. The woman was…well, she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever met, and he needed her. Soon.

He stood, and kissed her, a deep, passionate kiss that he hoped would put her in the mood for exactly what he had in mind. When she returned the kiss and began to remove his clothes, he was startled, but he certainly didn’t want her to stop.

When they both stood in all their glory, looking into each other’s eyes, she moved closer to him, wanting to feel his bare skin against her own. “I like how you feel against me,” she said.

“You’re killing me!”

“Am I doing something wrong?” she asked, surprised.

“Nothing wrong at all. I just didn’t expect you to be…so eager.”

She laughed. “I was raised on a farm. I know all about how babies are made, and I love the idea of becoming one with you. Your touch makes me feel so much!”

He sat down on the foot of the bed and pulled her down with him. “Is that so?”

“It is.” She picked up his hand and put it on her bare breast, trying to urge him to get on with things. She didn’t want to wait any longer than she already had.

He kissed her again, stretching out on the bed and pulling her to lie beside him. Within moments they were engaged in the dance of life, and her eyes were lit up with the pleasure he brought with each stroke inside her.

As soon as she gasped in pleasure, he started moving faster, finally reaching the pinnacle himself. Then he rolled to his side and pillowed her head on his shoulder.

She was still out of breath as she pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “I knew you’d make me feel good as soon as you kissed me.”

“Is that so?” he asked, grinning at her.

A strange sound came from the foot of the bed, and she looked up. There in the moonlight, Minnie was walking straight toward Cassandra. She settled on her chest and made another little sucking sound and went right back to sleep. “I am in love.”

He stared at her, his eyes widening. “You are?” It was what he

wanted, but he certainly hadn't expected it to happen so quickly.

"How could I not be? She's so perfect." Stroking the sleeping kitten with one finger, she smiled at her new husband. "Thank you again for my precious gift."

"Thanks for mine," he said. He was strangely let down. She loved the kitten, but she hadn't said the words to him. Maybe it was easier to love a kitten than it was a surly rancher.

Cameron hadn't been asleep long when he felt something tugging at his hair. His wife was sleeping snuggled against him, and when he reached up, he found the kitten nibbling on the ends of his hair. "What are you doing, you little monster?" he asked. The kitten meowed loudly at him. "I don't speak cat."

Cassandra opened her eyes a tiny bit. "She's hungry. Any raw meat would make her happy, but I might start cooking for her tomorrow."

He groaned. "I'm not sure I'm ready for you to have a cat."

"Too late," she whispered, rolling over and closing her eyes again.

Minnie jumped to his chest and yelled in his face. "Are you kidding me? You're tiny, so you should be no trouble."

"She'd be fine if you fed her." She lay there in the darkness waiting to see how he'd react to the sweet kitten.

"Why isn't she yelling at *you* for food?" he asked grumpily as he reached for his pants and pulled them on.

"She knows I need my beauty sleep," Cassandra mumbled. Her

eyes were closed, but she was very tuned into what he was doing.

"Fine, you little wretch." He got to his feet and scooped the kitten up in one strong hand, snuggling her under his chin as he'd seen Cassandra do. "You're more trouble than you're worth, you know."

Cassandra waited until the door closed behind him before she giggled a little. He was a good man if he was so gentle with one of God's tiny creatures. She heard him clomping around downstairs, and then she heard him step outside. His voice carried through the open window.

"You need to deal with your needs while we're out here," he said. "I'm not going to wake up with cat sh…poop on my floor." Then it was. "Well, you did good. I'm impressed. You even buried that mess you made."

Then she heard him shout. "Ow! Your claws are sharp, you little monster."

Cassandra giggled again. The kitten must have climbed him the same way she'd been climbing Cassandra all day. She found it endearing, but she had a feeling Cameron wasn't going to be quite as happy with the creature's silly habits.

She heard feet stomping up the stairs again, and Cameron walked into the room. She heard a rustling sound, and she knew he was putting the kitten in the bed she'd made for her.

Hearing him undress in the dark, she smiled. His body had made her awfully happy earlier, and she hoped they could repeat what they'd done often. The bed dipped, and he settled in beside her, his

arm reaching for her to pull her back against him.

The sound of the kitten climbing the bed again made her giggle, and he groaned. “She’s a menace!”

“But she’s such a cute little menace.” Minnie came back to them, and she settled on Cameron’s chest this time. “She likes you.”

“Great. Just what I always wanted.” He stroked the kitten’s head and listened to it grumble at him again. She was going to take some getting used to.

Chapter Eight

Cassandra didn't find it as funny when the kitten was batting her hair around before sunup the following morning. Thankfully, she was an early riser. She walked to the room she'd slept in her first night and put on a day dress. Cameron had told her his mother rarely came upstairs because her knees pained her, so she didn't mind walking around with nothing on.

After dressing, she walked toward the stairs, looking behind her every few steps to make sure Minnie was following. In the kitchen, she saw Mrs. Royal standing at the stove cooking breakfast. "Would you scramble a few extra eggs for Minnie?"

"Of course, I will. That kitten sure does like you."

Cassandra glanced down at the tiny creature and smiled. "I like her too. I'm going to go and milk the cows and gather eggs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Minnie followed her to the barn, and she found a small dish to put milk into for the kitten. Cassandra had no idea what the dish had been used for, but she didn't care, and she had a feeling Minnie wouldn't care either. She squeezed one of the teats, getting just enough milk to fill the bowl, and put it on the ground. The kitten sniffed at it, and then she lapped it up, while Cassandra milked the cow.

The kitten followed her to the hen's enclosure and watched as she gathered the eggs. After a moment, she seemed to realize she was missing out on some sort of fun, and she chased one of the chickens.

Minnie wasn't terribly impressed when the chicken pecked her face, but Cassandra shook her head. She had been around animals enough that she knew kittens would learn from their mistakes.

Sure enough, Minnie didn't stay with the chickens and followed her back to the house.

Cassandra set the milk on the table and the eggs on the counter beside the stove. "What can I do to help?"

"You've already done what I need help with. Later you can work on the garden while I do some sewing. I'm going to start on that split skirt today," Mrs. Royal said.

"Thank you." She would be thrilled to wear the unfashionable item of clothing. It would be perfect for her when she was gardening.

"I'm happy to do it. I hope you know how excited I am to have you as a daughter."

"I feel the same way. I won't miss my own mother so much if I have you here with me. And I'll help with anything. Boss me around as if you gave birth to me, and then I'll feel right at home."

Cameron reached the bottom of the stairs in time to hear her last sentence. "I sure hope my mother didn't give birth to you given what we did in my bed last night."

"I think it's *our* bed now," Cassandra said. She refused to be embarrassed about making love with her husband.

He laughed. "Does nothing ever embarrass you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll let you know if I think of something." She walked to her husband and hugged him, giving him a light kiss on the lips. "Good morning."

“Good morning.” He stood with his arms around her for a moment, and then looked down. “Ouch!”

Sure enough, Minnie was climbing his legs as if he was a tree. He grabbed her in one hand and held her in front of his eyes, letting her dangle in the air. “You are going to start behaving, little missy! I’m not putting up with you hurting me or anyone else.”

Minnie’s reaction wasn’t a surprise. She opened her mouth and yelled into Cameron’s face, letting him know that she didn’t care what he thought. He sighed and set her back on the floor. Thankfully, his mother had put a small saucer of eggs on the floor, and Minnie was eating them happily.

While they were eating, Minnie climbed Cassandra’s skirt and poked her head up onto the table from her lap. She tried to move toward Cassandra’s eggs, but Cassandra tapped her on the nose, and said, “No,” firmly.

Minnie yelled back, but she settled on Cassandra’s lap instead of continuing to try for the eggs. “I think she’s going to have a difficult time settling in,” Mrs. Royal said, looking over at Cassandra.

“Who can blame her? All her brothers and sisters are gone. I feel bad for her.”

“I don’t,” Cameron said. “I hope she doesn’t cause too much mischief while I’m gone today.”

“I can handle it,” Cassandra said smiling down at the kitten sleeping in her lap.

“I hope so.” Cameron didn’t look convinced, but she refused to be bothered. The kitten could run and play while she worked in the

garden. What could go wrong?

An hour later, she knew the answer to her question. *Everything* could go wrong. The kitten decided that the garden was the perfect place to take care of business, and she was constantly going just a little, and then burying it in the garden.

She attacked the leaves of the carrots that were sticking up out of the ground, and then she dug a carrot up. “Minnie, you stop that this instant!”

Minnie yelled at her in return.

“That’s it. I’m calling you Minnie Mouth, because you are the mouthiest cat I ever did see.” Cassandra shook her head, pulling the kitten out of the garden for the twentieth time that day—and it wasn’t even nine in the morning yet.

After fixing the damage the kitten had done, Cassandra stuck her head into the house. “I’m going to go pick berries again. Cameron was so happy to eat those pies yesterday.”

“Cameron will soon be begging for more pies, and the berries will be gone. We’ll have to can some pie filling and some jams. That might keep his sweet tooth happy for a little while.”

“I’ll go every day until the berries are gone.”

“By the time those berries are gone for the season, we’ll be able to pick choke cherries and huckleberries. He doesn’t care what I feed him as long as there’s sugar involved.”

Cassandra smiled. “Then I’m off to make my husband happy with sweets.”

As she started for the berry patch, the kitten followed along

behind her. The poor baby was getting sleepy, so Cassandra picked her up and tucked her into her apron pocket. There was no better place for the kitten.

While she was picking berries, the kitten climbed out of her pocket and dropped to the ground, running in circles and chasing anything that moved, which seemed to be mainly crickets. Cassandra was highly entertained while she worked, loving the way the kitten played and played.

Once the basket was full, she put the kitten back in her pocket for the walk back to the house. The little critter had worn herself out and was sleeping on a patch of grass. She was certainly a handful.

Back at the house, she gave her mother-in-law the basket of berries, and got herself some water. “I should have had a full glass before I left for the berries. Now I’m really thirsty,” she said. Of course, she was also really happy. She had a kitten, she was working outdoors, and her husband made her body sing. What else could a woman want from life?

“Can I help you make the noon meal?” Cassandra asked.

“No, you may not. You are to sit at the table and tell me about the children you cared for before you came here.”

“Oh, that’s a sad story,” Cassandra said. “The mother believed that for a child to be truly intelligent, which is what she wanted for her boys, they must spend all their time in scholarly pursuits. I was to play games with them that made them think. They were to read, or I was to read to them. No out of doors were allowed. I have no idea why she was that way, but the boys were miserable.”

“Did you ever ask her why?”

“Of course, I did. She said she wanted her boys to grow up to be lawyers like their father, and she knew they would need to spend a great deal of time studying to be capable of such a profession. Their father begged her to let them play with other children, but the answer was always no. I even taught them. They weren’t allowed to go to a school with other children because then their mother wouldn’t be in complete control of every minute of their days. It was sad.”

Mrs. Royal shook her head. “So, the boys were never allowed to play outside at all?”

“No. I was their nursemaid but also their governess. I worked with both boys from the time they were born. They were both reading at three, which is amazing, but think of all the hours they weren’t making mudpies to make that happen. So hard.”

The kitten jumped up on the table and yelled in Cassandra’s face once again. “Are you hungry again?”

“How on earth do you know what that means?”

Cassandra shrugged. “I’m really not sure, but I know she’s hungry. Would you mind if I made her a couple of eggs? Or is there any bacon left from breakfast?”

“There’s a little bacon. I was going to use it for sandwiches for lunch, but you can take some of it. We’ll still have enough to feed the three of us.”

“Where is it?” Cassandra asked, getting to her feet.

“In the oven staying a little warm. I like to do a light meal for our midday meal, and then I fix something heavier at night. It works

better for us. Cameron hates to spend a long time eating while he's in the middle of his workday."

"I understand. My father was the same way. He liked to have a big breakfast, a small noon meal, and then a large supper. He said it worked better for him."

"It sounds like you're close to your father."

Cassandra nodded. "As the oldest, I'd follow him around helping him plant and harvest. I spent more time on my hands and knees pulling weeds than I did doing anything else in the summers. Then when my younger brother was old enough, I had to stay at home and help my mother. But she found me difficult, so she'd send me outside to work on her garden. It worked well for both of us."

"Why did she find you difficult?"

Cassandra set the bacon into the same bowl the kitten had used for her eggs that morning. As soon as Minnie saw it, she hurried to the food and ate noisily, gobbling it quickly. "Because I wanted to be outside and not inside sewing or cooking. I never cared to learn those things. I mean, I can sew a straight seam, but I hate it. I can cook a meal, but I'd rather grow the food to make that meal."

"And you made your feelings known, I suppose."

"Always. So, she'd send me outside to get me to be quiet. It worked well for both of us."

Mrs. Royal sliced the fresh bread she'd made while Cassandra was out working on the garden and picking berries. "Cameron will be home any minute for his noon meal. I hope you're ready to watch food disappear quickly."

“I am. I suppose he takes more time with his supper.”

“He really does.”

“Wade will be over shortly after supper tonight for his first reading lesson,” Cassandra said. “He’s really excited to learn to read.”

Mrs. Royal frowned at Cassandra. “Does Cameron know?”

“Yes, I told him that first night I was here.”

“But now you’re married…”

“I chose Cameron over Wade. Why could Cameron worry if I spend time with Wade now? It makes no sense. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“I’m not so sure…”

“I’ll tell him as soon as he walks in the door, so it won’t be an unpleasant surprise.”

“Tell me what?” Cameron asked, hanging his hat on the hook beside the door.

Cassandra smiled at her husband and walked to him to kiss him in greeting. He seemed surprised, but he didn’t complain. “What are you going to tell me?”

“Wade is coming over tonight for a reading lesson. I know I told you and your mother about it on Wednesday night when I arrived, but she seems to think that since we’re married, you won’t like it.” Watching her husband’s face for a reaction, she bit her lip, worried she’d made a mistake.

Cameron shrugged. “That’s fine. I don’t want you spending time alone with him or anything, but I don’t mind you teaching him to read.”

Mrs. Royal smiled a bit. “You aren’t like your father at all.”

“I never was.”

Cassandra looked between the two of them. “Did your father die?”

Cameron gave one curt nod and took his place at the head of the table. “He did. A long time ago.”

“What happened?”

“We don’t talk about that man in my home.” Cameron’s voice was harsh, and Cassandra couldn’t imagine what she’d done to deserve that tone of voice.

“I’m sorry. I won’t bring him up again.” But she would. As soon as Cameron was gone after the meal, she’d ask his mother. He shouldn’t be keeping secrets from his wife anyway.

Minnie went to Cameron and stood looking at him before she wove in and out of his legs. He reached down and scratched her ears, and she looked very content. “I hope you were good this morning.”

“She tried,” was all Cassandra would say. Truthfully, who was to say what was good behavior for a cat?

After Mrs. Royal was seated, Cameron said a quick prayer and then he took the three sandwiches on his plate and ate them faster than Cassandra had ever seen anyone eat. She was a little surprised by the sheer speed. “What if he chokes?” Cassandra asked his mother.

“He never has,” Mrs. Royal whispered back.

Cameron swallowed the huge bite of food in his mouth. “Don’t talk about me as if I’m not here.”

“Sorry,” Cassandra said, but she wasn’t. He had displayed

strange behavior, so she could talk about him as if it was strange, couldn't she?

A minute later, he wiped his mouth on a napkin, drank down a large glass of water, and Mrs. Royal jumped up to refill an empty jar that he'd set on the counter. She filled it with water and handed it to him. "Have a good day, son."

"You too." And with that, he was gone. Cassandra glanced at her sandwich and saw that only one bite was gone. And he'd eaten three in the same period of time. Her husband had the manners of a dog, but she'd keep him around anyway.

Chapter Nine

That evening when Wade came over to learn, Cameron and Mrs. Royal stepped outside to talk. Though Cassandra couldn't hear them over the lesson she was giving, she knew they were talking about something serious. They were hiding something from her, and she had no idea what it was.

She concentrated on her lesson, though, and by the time Wade left, he knew the names and sounds of all the vowels. It was a huge accomplishment for him. "You did great. I think you should come back Monday evening." She had to figure out what was going on before she could concentrate on teaching him.

He nodded. "I was going to suggest the same thing. School Monday through Friday and then off on the weekends."

"Exactly." She smiled. "Thanks for being understanding about me marrying Cameron. I know it was strange how it all happened."

"Once I saw him kiss you at your wedding, I knew you made the right choice." He sighed. "But once I can read and write, I want the address for the matchmaker who sent you out here. I need to be able to find a bride as well."

"I'd love to provide it," she said, smiling at him. She was glad he didn't hold it against her that she hadn't chosen him. It just hadn't been right.

As he left, Cameron and Mrs. Royal came inside. After studying them for a minute, Cassandra decided that it was time to just ask outright. "I know you're hiding something from me. I just need to

know what it is."

Cameron and his mother looked at one another, but he gave a little shake of his head. "Maybe we'll tell you someday."

Cassandra was surprised at just how much his words hurt her. She thought they were beyond secrets now that they were married. "I hate that you won't tell me." She had no idea what to say to him to convince him that as husband and wife there should be no secrets between them.

At that minute, little Minnie Mouth climbed her skirt and all the way up the bodice of her dress, yelling in her face once she was high enough to do so. "I guess I need to feed the baby. I know kittens nurse every three hours, but I thought when they were older they could go longer between meals."

Minnie let out another loud meow, and Cassandra shook her head. "Did we save a little bit of the meat from supper?"

Mrs. Royal nodded. "I put some on a plate in the oven. Whenever she gets hungry give her a bit. It's the only way we're going to keep that one satisfied."

"She certainly does make her opinions known, doesn't she?" Cassandra took the kitten to the bowl that had become hers and put a bit of the meat from the oven into it. "Happy now?"

Minnie began eating her food greedily, gobbling it down as if she expected another animal to come along and take it from her.

Cassandra turned back to Cameron and his mother who both stood watching her. "I guess no one is going to tell me anything. I'll go milk the cows."

Cameron held up a hand. “I’ll do it.”

“Fine.” She wasn’t going to argue with him. She was too angry, and she knew she’d say something harsh.

Mrs. Royal smiled at Cassandra as soon as Cameron was out the door. “It’s not my secret to share,” she said, “or I’d tell you.”

Cassandra nodded. “I wish you could, but I guess Cameron will tell me as soon as he trusts me. If he *ever* trusts me that is.” She saw that Minnie had finished eating and she took her outside to the side of the house opposite the garden. “You can do your business here.”

Minnie immediately trotted toward the garden with Cassandra right behind her. “Get back here!”

Cameron walked toward the house with a bucket of milk in his hand. “Trouble with little miss mouthy?”

“I’m calling her Minnie Mouth from now on. And she thinks the garden is the perfect place for her outhouse. I don’t know how to convince her that the other side of the house is better.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to reason with a cat. Sorry.” And he went inside, leaving Cassandra to pick up the kitten and follow him.

Minnie climbed her as she walked inside, settling herself on Cassandra’s chest. Frowning down at the kitten, she finally said, “Is that the most comfortable place you can find?”

“She does love you,” Cameron told her.

“I guess she does.” She wanted to add, “Someone needs to,” but she didn’t dare.

“I’m heading to bed,” Mrs. Royal said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Royal.”

“I thought you were going to call me Ma now that you’re married.”

“How can I do that when you’re keeping a big secret from me? No, I’ll have to keep calling you Mrs. Royal.”

A frown was her only response as the older woman went into her room and shut the door.

Cameron frowned at Cassandra. “I really don’t feel right telling you yet. Soon.”

“How soon?” Cassandra asked. “We’re married. It’s not like I’m going to run off screaming all your secrets. I enjoy what we do together too much to tell anyone anything.”

He shook his head. “Soon.” As soon as he knew she loved him, then he would tell her what she wanted to know. He couldn’t keep it inside too much longer anyway. He hated to keep secrets from her.

At that moment, watching her look at him sadly, he realized he’d already fallen in love. He’d known the woman just over forty-eight hours, and he loved her. It didn’t seem possible. “Is that rotten little thing sleeping with us again?” he asked.

She smiled. “She’s sleeping with me. If you want to sleep with me, then she’s sleeping with us.”

“Sassy Cassie. You are really a woman with your own mind, aren’t you?”

“Would you have me any other way?”

Oh, he’d have her however she wanted to come to him. If he had her by his side, he felt like a new man. It was as if none of the

nastiness that had plagued him since his father's death was there anymore. Instead, she filled his heart with gladness.

"Let's go to bed." He took the kitten from her and placed her on his shoulder. Minnie looked everywhere, seeming excited to be up so high and to see so many new things. She rode on his shoulder all the way up the stairs and into their bedroom, and then he put her in the kitten bed.

Minnie jumped out and climbed onto the bed, watching them to see what they'd do next. Cassandra didn't mind, and she immediately started stripping.

Cameron groaned. "Why is the kitten watching me undress?"

"Well, you look pretty amazing with no clothes on. I'm sure she loves looking at you just like I do."

"You're not supposed to tell me that!"

"Oh? Who made that rule? I figured that I could say whatever I wanted as long as we both enjoy being together. Is that not true?"

He chuckled. "I suppose it is. You're so reasonable."

"It comes from being a part of such a big family. I think we should have at least a dozen kids."

"I'm not so sure. What if I'm a terrible father?" he asked, thinking of his own father.

"Then I'll be the best mother alive to balance you out. How could I be anything else? Besides, you're going to be a good father. Look how good you are with little Minnie Mouth."

"Minnie Mouth really does suit her." he asked.

"She's always so mouthy. Talking back and all. Nothing else

would fit her half as well!"

He chuckled. "I think you're right." He looked back at the kitten. "What are we going to do with her? I'm not ready to sleep."

She smiled. "I know what you're thinking about. Maybe I can get her to sleep in her little bed for long enough for us to do what we want to do."

"You think?" he asked.

She picked Minnie up and stroked her head, talking softly to her. The kitten was out within a couple of minutes. After putting her in her bed, Cassandra looked at Cameron who was already undressed and very obviously ready for her. "What would you have done if I couldn't get her to sleep?" she asked.

He reached for her, his hands going to the buttons on the back of her dress. "I guess I'd have learned to make love to my wife with a kitten watching."

Cassandra giggled. She was so happy she was married to Cameron, but she was also happy to have Minnie in her life. What could go wrong?

Every day for the rest of the month, Cassandra waited for Cameron to tell her what he was hiding, and every day she worried a little more. She couldn't understand why he couldn't trust her with his secrets when he trusted her with his body? It didn't make sense to her at all.

Minnie was growing like a weed, and Cassandra got a great deal of joy out of the kitten, but Mrs. Royal was fed up with the kitten

playing with her yarn when she wanted to knit.

The split skirt was finished, and Cassandra wore it whenever she was working in the garden or out picking berries. She discovered she enjoyed huckleberries and choke cherries just as much as blackberries and raspberries. And there were apple trees that would be ready in September. It was good to have all the fresh fruits, and she helped her mother-in-law can jars of jam and pie filling.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been able to get this many berries before. I just don’t have the energy or the patience to spend that much time out in the sun picking berries.”

“And I was born for it!” Cassandra said with a smile. “Soon the garden will be ready, and I’ll harvest, and we’ll do even more canning. Have I mentioned yet how much I hate canning?” She knew she’d mentioned it at least three dozen times over the course of time she’d been there, but she felt the need to mention it again.

“How are the reading lessons coming?”

“Oh, wonderfully. Wade’s writing his name and other small words now. I brought one of the primers I used to teach George and Michael how to read, and Wade’s able to read many of the stories in it already. I do think he’s almost ready to continue on his own without me. I had no idea how sharp he was or how quickly he’d learn. I think his goal is to learn to write well enough that he can write a letter to send away for a bride.”

Mrs. Royal laughed. “I think you’re probably right. He likes the idea of sending for a bride of his own. I think he knows that you and Cameron belong together though.”

“I wish I could be certain.” Cassandra regretted the words as soon as they escaped her lips.

“The secret still bothers you?”

“Yes, it really does. I don’t know what you two are hiding from me, and I feel like without knowing, I can never truly be a part of this family.”

Mrs. Royal nodded, but she looked sad. “I can’t tell you. I wish I could. Perhaps you should bring it up to Cameron again.”

“Maybe.” Cassandra really wasn’t certain she wanted to bring it up again. Every time she tried, he changed the subject or said he’d tell her soon. When was soon going to happen?

“Trust him.”

“I’m trying.” Cassandra picked up Minnie who was weaving between her legs trying to get some attention and stroked her little head. “I hate how fast she’s growing up.”

“All children are like that. One day they’re in diapers, and then next they want to run wild in the streets with their little heathen friends.”

“Oh my! You have feelings about that, don’t you?”

“Go and pick me some more huckleberries. It takes so many to make a pie. I like to mix them with strawberries so that I don’t have to have as many, but the strawberries weren’t good this year.”

“That’s sad! I think I saw a cherry tree on the other side of the path. Would anyone mind if I went and got the rest of the cherries off those trees?”

Mrs. Royal shook her head. “No, that’s our land, and Cameron

loves his cherry pies."

"Then I'll take the basket and a bucket."

"Cherries will do better than huckleberries in the basket."

Cassandra nodded. "I'm on my way. Hopefully, we'll have lots when I get back." She looked down at Minnie. "Are you coming with me, or are you staying here?"

Minnie tilted her head to one side as if she was considering the question, but when Cassandra opened the door, the kitten ran out ahead of her. "She's coming with me!"

Mrs. Royal laughed. "You two really do speak to one another, don't you?"

Hurrying along with the basket and the bucket, Minnie walked alongside her, and sometimes in front of her. For a minute or two it felt like the kitten was doing everything she could to kill Cassandra. "Do you want to ride in my apron again? You're getting much too big for that."

Minnie let out a loud meow that Cassandra was certain was a scolding. "All right. You're as tiny as the first time I held you." Cassandra set down the bucket and picked up Minnie, tucking her in her apron. Why the kitten was so happy riding there, Cassandra would never know.

When they reached the cherry tree, Cassandra put the kitten back on the ground and let her play as she picked the cherries. There were so many, and they all seemed perfectly ripe. Her basket was soon full, so she tucked Minnie away and headed to the huckleberry bushes she'd seen.

As much as Cassandra enjoyed harvesting fruit, she hated picking huckleberries. The tiny little berries were not big enough that you felt like you were doing anything when you picked them. It took so many to make anything.

When her bucket was half full, she decided it was enough for the day, and she walked back toward the house. The walk was further than the blackberries and raspberries were, but it wasn't too far from the house.

She stopped outside the door to put Minnie down, and then put her hand on the doorknob to open it. She could hear loud voices coming from inside the house. "Cameron, if you don't tell her soon, I'm afraid you're going to lose her."

"I wanted her to tell me she loved me before I told her what happened. I don't want her to leave."

"I know you don't." Mrs. Royal's voice was soothing. "But I think that's what will happen if you don't tell her."

Cassandra couldn't wait another minute. She opened the door and looked at Cameron. "I've loved you since our wedding night when you got up to take Minnie downstairs for food. How could you doubt that?"

Mrs. Royal looked between the two of them. "I'm going for a walk, and I think this time, Minnie is going with me." She stooped down to pick up the cat and carried her out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

Chapter Ten

Cassandra and Cameron stood in silence for more than a minute, both of them waiting for the other person to speak. “You heard us talking,” Cameron finally said.

Cassandra nodded. “You weren’t being quiet. I told myself that I wouldn’t tell you I loved you until I knew your secret. I didn’t think you could love me if you didn’t trust me.”

He sighed, taking her hand, and leading her into the parlor. “I do love you, my Sassy Cassie. Of course, I do. Why would I have married you otherwise?”

“Because you wanted me to warm your bed, and you wanted a kitten sleeping on you, of course.”

He sat down on the sofa and shook his head. He was glad she was finding humor in the situation because what he had to tell her was grim. “I don’t want you to think less of me when you hear this.”

She shook her head. “How could I?”

“You don’t know what I’m about to say to you. How could you not?” He took a deep breath, fighting down the fear that was overwhelming him. Admitting this to anyone but his mother…well, it took more courage than he felt he had at times. “I killed my father.”

Her jaw dropped, and she looked into his eyes, knowing the man she had come to love so much, who was so gentle with her, would never kill anyone without reason. “I’m so sorry you had to do that.”

He blinked a few times. “How do you know I had to?” Her faith in him was astounding, and he knew he didn’t deserve one lick of it.

“Because you’re not a man who kills. Even when you and Wade were competing for my hand, neither of you were unkind to the other. It was very amicable. I cannot imagine you killing anyone without it being an accident or a very good reason.”

Reaching for her, he pulled her into his arms and just held her for a moment. “Thank you for believing in me, even after hearing that.”

“Of course,” she said. “Tell me what happened.” She was curious, but she had a feeling they would never speak of this again. It was obviously too difficult for him to talk about.

“I had just started attending King’s College right there in Manhattan where I’d grown up.” He took another deep breath. “My father had always been unkind to my mother. Her parents arranged their match with his parents, and they just didn’t get along well. He drank a lot, and he’d taken to hitting her in my last few years before I graduated school. At least that’s when I found out about it.”

She put her hand on his thigh to comfort him, and he carefully removed it. “If you want to hear the rest of this story, your hand needs to be elsewhere.”

She laughed softly. “Sorry about that.”

“Oh, trust me. I like it.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I was just finishing up my first semester, and I’d gone home for the Christmas break. I was staying in the dorms at the university because it was easier than watching my father yell at my mother. I should never have left her there alone with just him and the servants.” He rubbed a hand over his face, seeming terribly upset to her.

“Go on.”

“When I got home, I followed the sound of his voice into the parlor, and I saw my mother standing up to him. She told him he wouldn’t ever speak to her that way again. Already her face was covered in bruises like she’d been beaten to within an inch of her life in the days before.” He closed his eyes. “I was young, and my temper ran high, especially when it came to someone mistreating my mother. I reached for a poker on the fireplace, and I raised it. I thought he’d back away, but he didn’t. Instead, he told me that if I didn’t kill him, he would kill her. There was no way he could live with her one more minute.”

“Oh dear.” She couldn’t imagine how hard that moment was for him.

“Ma pled with me to drop the poker. She said her life wasn’t as important as mine. He just stood there and laughed. I hit him once in the head. I was trying for his shoulder, but he moved at the last second. The poker was so heavy that I couldn’t change directions. I wanted to hurt him enough that Ma and I could leave, but I didn’t want to kill him. He was my father.”

“Of course, you didn’t.”

“Ma and I hurried up the stairs, and we packed everything that was necessary. All her jewelry, which we knew we’d end up selling because we would need money to start over. We went to Oregon City and filed our claims for land. Ma filed for one, and so did I. This was the land we filed for. When I looked at the map the surveyor had in his office, I saw that the name of the river running through the land

was Royal River. So, I said our last name was Royal."

"What was it before?" she asked.

"If it's really important to you, I'll tell you, but I'd honestly rather not say. That man is gone as far as I'm concerned. I'm Cameron Royal, and my legacy starts with me."

Cassandra considered it for a moment, but finally she shook her head. "I don't need to know what your name was. I just need to know who you are now."

"You're not angry that I hid this from you?" he asked.

"I wouldn't say you really hid it. I heard you and your mother talking the first day I was here, and you mentioned in the conversation that you weren't really Royals. I knew then you had a secret, and it was probably a big one. I knew you had one when I agreed to marry you, and I don't regret it for one minute."

"Is that so?" he asked, grinning at her.

"It is so! I'm not even ashamed of it." She scooted toward him on the sofa and snuggled close. "I picked cherries and huckleberries today. Ma said your favorite pie is cherry, so I got a basketful."

"What have I done in my life to deserve you?" he asked softly.

"You took care of your mother when someone wanted to hurt her. You didn't throw me out in the dirt when I arrived here when you weren't expecting me. And you're the best kisser in the whole nation."

He raised an eyebrow at that. "And exactly how many men have you kissed that you can make that claim?"

"Oh, only you, but a woman knows these things."

He chuckled. "Thank you."

“For what?”

“For understanding and for loving me anyway. You’re not going to sneak off in the middle of the night and catch a train back to Massachusetts, are you?”

“No. I couldn’t if I wanted to. I quit my job, or I got fired. It was kind of unclear as it was happening. And my parents have no room for me. Their house is already full. I suppose I could go back and stay with Elizabeth, but she doesn’t need me underfoot.”

He kissed her softly. “I don’t know how long Ma will be gone with that kitten, but I would sure love some alone time with my wife that doesn’t include a kitten sitting on the end of the bed watching me make love.”

Cassandra giggled. “She only did that once.”

“I felt like she was trying to figure out how these things were done, and we were being studied. It was terrible!”

She stood up and took his hand. “Well, let’s go! Before your ma gets home.”

They raced up the stairs, giggling like silly children. He felt lighter than he’d felt in years when she hadn’t hated him for confessing what he’d done.

She felt as if the world was wide open now. Happily married and looking forward to the rest of her life, she would never be the girl who had left Massachusetts again. No, she was a married woman now, happier than she’d ever dreamed of being.

Cassandra was the first into the bedroom, and she stripped quickly, ready for some alone time without a cat watching as well. She

found it creepy when the kitten studied them as they made love, but she knew it was Minnie's way.

Slamming the door behind him, Cameron immediately got out of his work clothes and joined his wife on their bed. "I love you so much, Sassy Cassie."

Cassandra smiled. "I'm not sassy at all. Have you met Minnie yet?"

He groaned. "We're not talking about that cat while we're in bed. I just can't."

She giggled and drew him down for a kiss—their first real kiss since they'd professed their love for one another. "I love you right back, Cameron. I hope you don't think anything will ever change between us."

"Oh, it will when we start having babies…"

"And we still agree on twelve, right?"

"I'll argue with you about that later." His kiss made her forget what she wanted to talk about. How could she think of anything but how much she loved this man?

Epilogue

It was early spring, and the ground was still covered with snow. Cassandra stood watching out the window for Cameron to return home. Every day all she could think about was him joining her after work.

He was a little later than usual, but that happened sometimes. Especially during calving season. When he came in, there were bloodstains on his shirt. “Hard day?” she asked.

“Not as hard as yours.”

She looked at him curiously. “Why would you say that?”

“Well, you’re growing a human inside you. I’m only helping cows push their calves out.”

“Growing a little human isn’t as difficult as it sounds. My body seems to know exactly what to do.” Her pregnancy had been relatively easy so far.

Ma came called to him, “Go change your shirt and bring that one down to me. I’ll soak it and see if we can get that blood out.”

Cassandra grinned as Cameron sighed. “I was just hoping for a few minutes to talk to my beautiful bride.”

“Well, every minute that stain is setting in harder. Go change and then talk to her.”

As he climbed the stairs, he deftly stepped over Minnie who had taken to sleeping on a stair halfway up. At least this time there wasn’t a half-eaten mouse carcass on the stair beside her. In their room, he changed and carried the shirt back down to his mother. It was a work

shirt, and he'd wear it for calving year after year, so he had no idea why she was making a fuss over it.

Back downstairs, he moved to the table. "How are you feeling?" he asked, obviously worried about Cassandra.

"I'm fine! Oh! I almost forgot to tell you. Wade dropped off a letter to the matchmaker who sent me here. He wants me to proofread it so he can copy it back over and then send it. I told him no one would mind if there were a few misspelled words, but he didn't want his future bride to know he was illiterate just a year ago."

Cameron nodded. "Sounds like Wade. Now that he has his own spread, I rarely see him."

"I know. We need to have him over for supper soon, and I can't wait to meet the girl who travels out to be his wife."

"Sounds like you're looking to make a new friend."

Cassandra shrugged. "I'm always looking to make new friends, though I love spending time with Ma."

"I can't wait for you to make friends because then I get alone time with my grandbaby. Maybe you should spend a month in Massachusetts," Ma said, grinning at her.

"If I didn't think you were joking, my feelings would be hurt! That baby is going to need me to eat, so you can't get rid of me that easily."

"Very true…" Ma went back to her baking. "Just used our last jar of pie filling. We need there to be a good crop of berries this year. Just think, in another year there will be a baby crawling around and getting into everything. And he'll be fighting his daddy for that jam."

Cameron reached out and squeezed Cassandra's hand. "It won't be very long at all before the baby comes. I still think we should call him Myron."

"I hate that name!" Cassandra said. "I want to name her Elizabeth, after the woman who got us together."

"I think we'd have to name her Miriam then," Cameron responded.

Ma turned from the counter where she was removing a pie from the oven. "I approve of that name."

"I keep telling you both, this baby is a boy!" Cameron insisted.

Cassandra shrugged. "It's a girl, but I won't argue with you about it. You're too pigheaded to agree with reason."

"I'm pigheaded?" he asked. "Sassy Cassie. I hope if it is a girl, she turns out exactly like her mother."

"You want a sassy daughter?"

"Just like her mama." Cameron kissed her softly. "Then she'll be perfect."

Cassandra put her hand on her burgeoning belly. The baby was due in just three weeks, and the midwife was certain it was a girl, but she wouldn't tell Cameron that. No need to burst the man's bubble. Time would tell.